PAGEANT OF HISTORY

# HIGHWAYMEN

Christopher Hibbert

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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# HIGHWAYMEN

*Christopher Hibbert*

WITH 32 PAGES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Highwaymen* presents an entertaining and informative look at the origins and exploits of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "gentlemen of the road." It traces the history of their misdeeds from their rise to their ultimate downfall, brought about by the perseverance of the novelist Henry Fielding and his brother John—Bow Street Magistrates—and their small but determined force of men. Drawing freely upon contemporary accounts, the author shows the metamorphosis of the highwaymen, often of aristocratic birth, into folk heroes—

*(continued on back flap)*

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JACKET DESIGN BY *Paul Bacon*

*(continued from front flap)*

the proudest members of the criminal élite—worshiped and glorified in legend, ballad, novel and play.

Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard, Moll Cutpurse, the old Etonian William Parsons, and the French footman Claude Duval, all these notorious highwaymen and many others are revealed here in fine character sketches and amusing anecdotes. Numerous contemporary engravings and portraits complement the text.

Christopher Hibbert was born in Leicestershire in 1924 and was educated at Radley and Oriel College, Oxford. He is the author of several highly praised books of military and social history, including *The Road to Tyburn, King Mob, The Roots of Evil, Garibaldi and His Enemies,* and *The Destruction of Lord Raglan,* which won the Heinemann Award for Literature.

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# Highwaymen

Christopher Hibbert

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FOR

*Roderick and Rosemary*

# Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 'Knights of the Road' | 13 |
| 2 | Duval, Turpin and Some Others | 34 |
| 3 | Methods and Mistakes | 54 |
| 4 | Mr Fielding's People | 63 |
| 5 | Dreadful Mementoes | 85 |
| 6 | The Hanging Match | 90 |
| 7 | The Newgate Pastoral | 97 |
| | Notes on Further Reading | 123 |
| | Index | 125 |

# Acknowledgements

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*To the social inquirer the crime of any period is full of instruction. The highwayman is often more interesting to the historian of society than the learned judge who hangs him.*

SIR LESLIE STEPHEN

# I

# Knights of the Road

'Les highwaymen sont, en général, d'une classe supérieure; ils se piquent d'avoir de l'éducation et de bons procédés; aussi les appelle-t-on *gentlemen of the road*.'

*J. L. Ferri de St Constant, 1804*

'I was robbed last night as I expected,' the Prime Minister wrote with characteristic placidity to a friend in the autumn of 1774. 'Our loss was not great, but as the postillion did not stop immediately, one of the two highwaymen fired at him . . . It was at the end of Gunnersbury Lane.'

Lord North's resigned acceptance of his danger and his loss was a philosophy that his contemporaries had long since learned to share. Twenty years before, Horace Walpole had been moved to complain, with no more than a picturesque exaggeration of an undoubted truth, that one was 'forced to travel even at noon as if one was going into battle . . . what a shambles this country is grown!'

Walpole himself had been robbed by a highwayman who had threatened him with a pistol which exploded in his face and blackened his skin with powder and shot marks. He was left thinking that, had he been sitting an inch nearer the window, the ball would have passed through his brain. This was in Hyde Park, and was common enough even there. But on the main roads leading into London in the eighteenth century a journey passed without interruption was a matter for congratulation and surprise.

The roads themselves were atrocious. Inches deep in mud in winter, hidden by clouds of swirling dust in summer, they

were scarcely better around London than in other parts of the country. In his *Dissertation concerning the Present State of the High Roads of England, especially of those near London*, published in 1736, Robert Phillips describes conditions which remained virtually unchanged throughout the eighteenth century:

'In the Summer the Roads are suffocated and smothered with Dust; and towards the Winter, between wet and dry, there are deep Ruts full of Water with hard dry Ridges, which make it difficult for Passengers to cross by one another without overturning; and in the Winter they are all Mud, which rises, spues, and squeezes into the Ditches; so that the Ditches and Roads are full of Mud and Dirt all alike.'

It was a well-known fact, the *Gentleman's Magazine* complained twenty years later, that a 'party of gentlemen and ladies would sooner travel [from London] to the south of France and back again than down to Falmouth.'

With the likelihood of coaches becoming stuck in the mud or overturned, their axles broken, their horses lamed, their occupants and piled luggage thrown out into the ditch, travelling itself was an unpleasant and sometimes dangerous enough occupation, without the hazards of highwaymen as well. And highwaymen were, in the words of one experienced traveller, 'as common as crows'.

Visiting foreigners, accustomed in their own countries to a strong force of *maréchaussée* to protect the roads, were astonished by this state of affairs. The number of robbers, one Swiss traveller thought, was 'amazing'. A Frenchman wrote that all the main roads within thirty or forty miles of London were '*garnis de voleurs à cheval*'. The Abbé le Blanc recorded that in the 1720's highwaymen 'in order to maintain their rights', blatantly 'fixed up papers at the doors of the rich people about London, expressly forbidding all persons, of what condition or quality soever, to go out of town without ten guineas and a watch about them, upon pain of death.'

Sixty years later Sophie von la Roche was at a party in the country attended by several ambassadors who all came away

early. 'Perhaps they needed their money for gaming,' she commented, 'and hence could not afford to give it to the highwaymen! So they decided to depart all together, as the robbers would hardly hold up four coaches at once.'

Foreign visitors could at least comfort themselves, however, with the thought that provided they handed over their money and rings and watches quickly and without complaint – and this, they agreed, was essential – the English highwayman was unlikely to pull the trigger of the pistol he always held in his hand like a badge of office. Indeed, as the German historian Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz observed, highwaymen were 'generally very polite; they assure you *they are very sorry that poverty has driven them to that shameful recourse*, and end by demanding your purse in the most courteous manner.'

'I have been told,' César de Saussure confirmed, 'that some highwaymen are quite polite and generous, begging to be excused for being forced to rob, and leaving passengers the wherewithal to finish their journey.' And the Duc de Lévis agreed that '*en général, les choses se passent de part et d'autre avec beaucoup de sang-froid, et souvent même avec politesse.*'

The English newspapers of the time show that the experiences of these foreign tourists were not exceptional. The 'Knights of the Road', as they were flatteringly styled, were evidently much given to polite requests and gracious apologies. 'He behaved genteely,' runs a typical report, 'and by way of apology for what he did told the passengers that his distress drove him to it.'

'On Tuesday last,' the *Birmingham Gazette* reported on 6 May 1751, 'the Shrewsbury caravan was stopped between the Four Crosses and the Welsh Harp by a single highwayman who behaved very civilly to the passengers, told them that he was a stranger in distress, and hoped that they would contribute to his assistance. On which each passenger gave him something, to the amount in the whole of about 4l., with which he was mighty well satisfied, but returned some halfpence to one of them, saying he never took copper. He told them there were two other collectors on the road, but he

would see them out of danger, which he accordingly did, and begged that they would not at their next inn mention the robbery nor appear against him if he should be taken up hereafter.'

William IV used to enjoy telling the story of how his great-grandfather, George II, was robbed by a highwayman as he strolled one evening in his garden at Kensington. The highwayman climbed over the wall, apologized that distress drove him to such improper behaviour, and, 'with a manner of much deference, deprived the King of his purse, his watch, and his buckles.'

With women the English highwayman took pride in behaving with especial gallantry. According to the *Morning Chronicle* of 14 January 1797, 'a very gallant highway robbery was lately committed on Wimbledon Common upon the person of a young married lady. After receiving her purse, the robber politely demanded an elegant ring which he discovered on her finger. This she peremptorily refused, saying she "would sooner part with life"; the hero of the turf rejoined, "Since you value the ring so much, madam, allow me the honour of saluting the fair hand which wears it, and I shall deem it a full equivalent!" The hand was instantly stretched through the chariot window, and the kiss being received, the highwayman thanked her for her condescension, and instantly galloped off perfectly satisfied with the commutation.'

Such politeness and gallantry came as all the greater a surprise to foreign tourists, used as they were, in their own countries, to highway robbers who were usually as uncouth and brutal as the footpads who roamed the London streets at night and would knock their victims into the gutter as soon as look at them. Highway robbers in Italy, Germany and Spain, and most of those in France, the Duc de Lévis said, were rough criminals, deserters, smugglers, and drunken murderers, 'as accustomed to take men's lives as to risk their own, outlawed from society and at constant war with it'. In England, though, the case was quite different. The highwayman there was quite likely to be a gentleman, and certainly

Foreign visitors to England were astonished by the politeness of the English highwayman's requests and his gallant bearing. As this drawing by Daniel Chodowiecki indicates, highway robberies were carried out more violently on the Continent, where, as the Duc de Lévis said, highwaymen were rough criminals, deserters, drunken murderers, 'as accustomed to take men's lives as to risk their own'

MULLD·SAKE
I Walke the Strand, and Westminster; and Scorne
to march the Citie, though I beare the Horne,
My Feather, and my yellow Band, accord
to prove me Courtier My Boote, Spur, and Sword
My smoking Pipe, Scarfe, Garter Rose on Shoe,
Shewe my brave mind, I affect what Gallants do.
I Singe dance drinke and merrily pass the day.
and like a Chimney Sweep all care away.
Pub.d thus 2.nd 1714 by Canfield and Hodsell

John Cottington, known as Mulled Sack because of his insatiable thirst for good warm sherry, like many another seventeenth-century highwayman, was a devoted Royalist. His greatest coup was the robbery of the Army pay wagon on Shotover Hill

See here the Prefideſſe o'th pilfring Trade
Mercuryes ſecond; Venus's onely Mayd
Doublet and breeches in a Unform dreſſe
The Female Humurriſt a Kickſhaw meſſe
Heres no attraction that your fancy greets
But if her FEATURES pleaſe not read her FEATS..

Mary Frith, called Moll Cutpurse, robbed on the highways of Jacobean England dressed as a man. A big, strong, ugly woman, 'mighty taken with the pastime of smoking', she was the heroine of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girle*

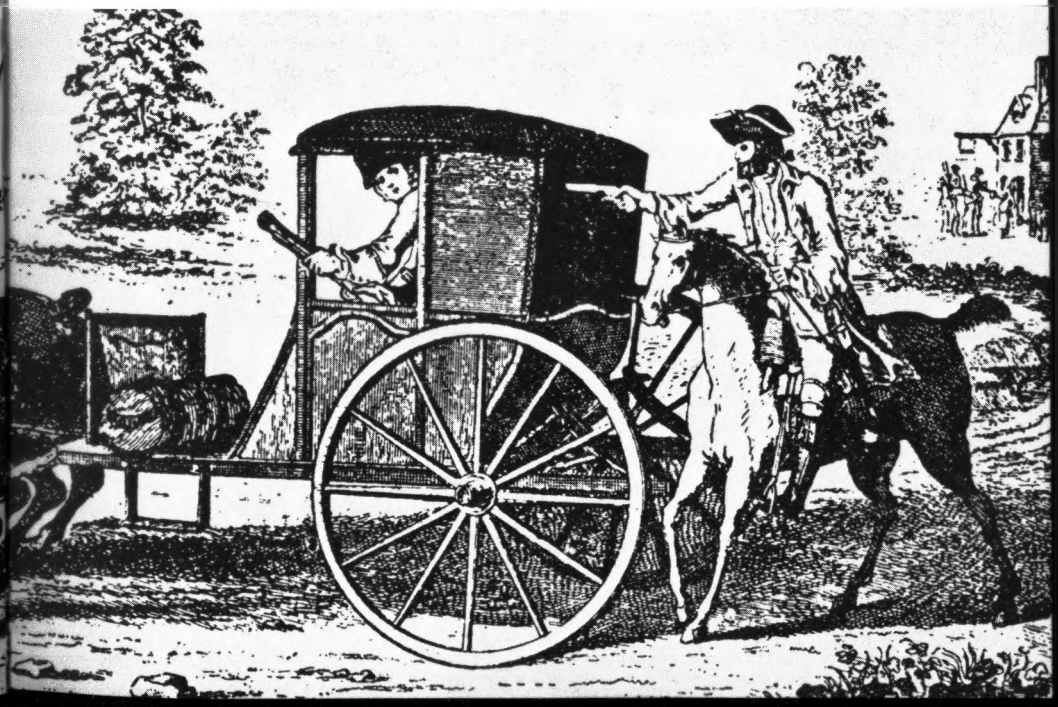
JONATHAN WILD THIEF-TAKER GENERAL OF GREAT BRITTAIN & IRELAND
To all the Thieves,
Whores, Pick-pockets,
Family Fellons &c.
in Great Brittain & Ireland.
Gentlemen & Ladies!
You are hereby desir'd to
accompany y worthy friend &
Patron Mr. I— W—d from his
Seat at Whittingtons Colledge
to y Tripple Tree, where he is
to make his last Exit
on and his
Corps to be Carry'd from thence
to be decently Interr'd a-
mongst his Ancestors.
Pray bring this Ticket with you

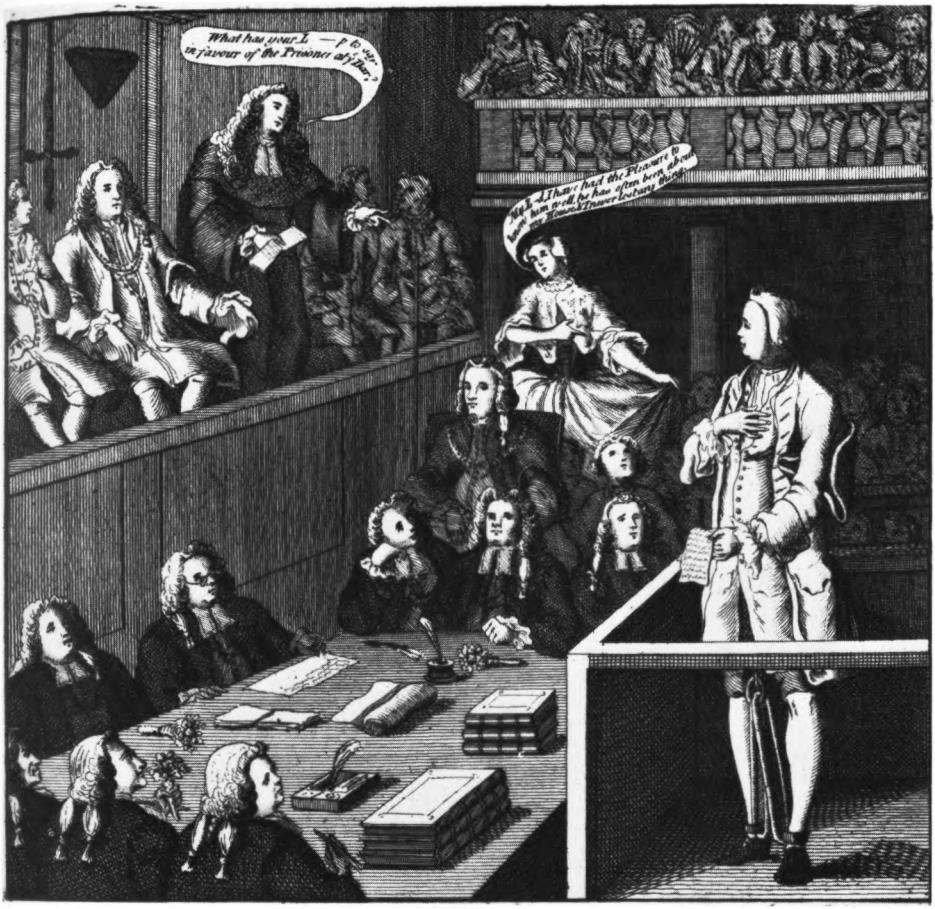
*left* Jonathan Wild, undisputed leader of the early eighteenth-century underworld in London, was also England's most successful thief-taker, earning £40 for each of the many highwaymen he brought to the gallows

*below left* John Rann, known as Sixteen String Jack, once a footman to 'a gentleman of fortune near Portman Square', was described in a contemporary account as 'remarkably clean, and particularly neat in his dress, which in two instances was very singular, that of always having sixteen strings to his breeches knees (by which means he acquired his fictitious name) and a remarkable hat with strings. He was of a genteel carriage, and made a very handsome appearance'

*right* James M'Lean (also spelled Macleane, Maclean and Maclaine), like many other highwaymen, was born of respectable parents and received a good education. Known as the Gentleman Highwayman, he lived in a smart apartment opposite White's in St James's, successfully adopting by day the character of a country squire temporarily living in London, while carrying out his robberies by night

*below* Among James M'Lean's many distinguished victims were Horace Walpole and Lord Eglinton – here being robbed on Hounslow Heath by M'Lean and his accomplice




What has your L — p to say in favour of the Prisoner at the Bar?
Ah! I that had the Pleasure to have him often here, to dine with me, never lost any thing

*above* Much sympathy was shown in court for the personable James M'Lean. Lady Caroline Petersham testified that she knew him well, had often had him to her house and 'never lost anything'

*opposite above* Horace Walpole said that he was almost the only member of society who had not been to see M'Lean in Newgate when he was imprisoned there under sentence of death. Lord Mountford, 'at the head of half White's', went the first day, Walpole said; Lord Mountford's aunt then went and burst into tears; so did Lady Caroline Petersham and Miss Ashe

*opposite below left* A journey through Maidenhead Thicket which did not involve a scene like this was often a matter for congratulation and surprise

*opposite below right* William Parsons, the Old Etonian son of a baronet and nephew of the Duchess of Northumberland, was an officer in the Navy before gambling debts induced him to take to the road and led to his being hanged at Tyburn

Windsor Forest was also a dangerous area. Here the Master of the Buck Hounds to Charles II is shown being robbed by Claude Duval, a Frenchman who came to England at the time of the Restoration and who became the most famous highwayman of the seventeenth century

aspired to be taken for one. He considered that he was – and other criminals supported him in this belief – a member of a criminal élite. He could be vicious – and usually was so – when he was not given what he demanded. But at least he took care, in most cases, to ask with grace and courtesy.

'*Les highwaymen sont, en général, d'une classe supérieure*,' a well-informed French observer, Ferri de St Constant, thought; '*ils se piquent d'avoir de l'éducation et de bons procédés; aussi les appelle-t-on* gentlemen of the road . . . One finds in all the stories and anecdotes told of them that they take a pride in carrying on their profession with distinction. One could say that they attach importance to honour, and that they think of their reputation as much as they do of their pockets.'

They had, after all, a great tradition to live up to. Robin Hood may well have been – as Sir Edward Coke said he was – a brigand who lived in Yorkshire 'in woods and deserts, by robbery, burning of houses, felony, waste and spoile, and principally by and with vagabonds, idle wanderers, night-walkers and draw-latches.' But it was the Robin Hood of ballad and legend, of writers and minstrels that men remembered and admired, a hero who robbed the rich and gave to the poor, a champion created for the dreams and hopes of the oppressed. And this was the type of outlaw that most highwaymen hoped to be mistaken for.

They had other, more recent, models, too. The Civil War and the Commonwealth had thrown up a number of gentlemanly robbers who, ruined by their loyalty to the King, had taken to the road in an attempt to recoup their lost fortunes by preying upon the Roundheads. There was the romantic cavalier Captain Reynolds, whose last words on the gallows were, 'God bless King Charles. *Vive le Roi!*' There was Captain Philip Stafford, who went to his death at Reading wearing a beautiful new suit, a fresh resplendent nosegay, and an expression of proud indifference. There was Zachary Howard, who had mortgaged his estate for £20,000 to raise a troop of horse for the King and who boasted that he

never touched the purse of any traveller other than known supporters of the Commonwealth.

Another devoted Royalist was John Cottington, known as 'Mulled Sack' (because of his insatiable thirst for good, warm, sherry), one of the nineteen children of a Cheapside haberdasher, who held up the army pay waggon on Shotover Hill, got away with £4,000, and 'constantly wore a watchmaker's and jeweller's shop in his pocket, and could at any time command a thousand pounds.' And there was Captain Hind, yet another Royalist, who had been expensively educated, never failed to raise his hat when making his polite demands, and was reported to have been the lover of the youngest daughter of a duke.

Following in this tradition the eighteenth-century highwayman who robbed Walpole took great pains to be accepted as a gentleman and was always excessively polite. Although he had nearly been killed, Walpole readily admitted that 'the whole affair was conducted with the greatest good breeding on both sides'. He advertised in the newspapers that he was willing to pay for the return of the items that had been stolen, and immediately received a reply which 'with less wit than the epistles of Voltaire, had ten times more natural and easy politeness'. The highwayman and his accomplice apologized for the accident and gave instructions for the exchange of the goods through a servant – 'the same footman that was behind the Chariot when Rob'd will be most agreeable to Us as We Intend Repaying him a trifle we took from him.'

This highwayman was James M'Lean, whose background and character have much in common with those of many other young men who took to the road in the eighteenth century.

M'Lean was the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister who had given him a good education and left him a fair sum of money when he died. M'Lean spent all the money within a year and *faute de mieux* became butler in a rich household at Cork. Dismissed for pilfering, he went to London, entered the service of an English gentleman, married a horse-dealer's

daughter and, with her dowry, started in business as a grocer in Welbeck Street. The business failed; his wife died; and, persuading a bankrupt apothecary named Plunkett to pose as his footman, he set off for Tunbridge Wells to find himself another and richer wife.

Despite his good manners, pleasant Scottish voice, and insinuating charm M'Lean had no immediate success. So, needing more money for the maintenance of his pretence, he and Plunkett took to the road. More through Plunkett's endeavours than his own – for M'Lean himself by all accounts was irresolute and jumpy – he made enough money to set himself up with a mistress in a smart apartment opposite White's and thereafter was often to be seen walking in St James's magnificently clothed in a crimson damask banian, a splendid waistcoat, white silk stockings, and yellow morocco slippers. 'He was in person of the middle size,' according to a man who knew him, 'well limbed, and a sandy complexion, a broad, open countenance pitted with the small-pox; but though he was called the Gentleman Highwayman, and in his dress and equipage very much affected the fine gentleman, yet to a man acquainted with good breeding, and that can distinguish it from impudence and affectation, there was very little in his address or behaviour that could entitle him to the character.'

Nevertheless, his airs and manner seem to have been convincing enough, and he successfully adopted by day the character of a country squire living temporarily in London, while continuing by night in his career as a highwayman. One day, however, he was caught selling to a pawnbroker a suit of clothes which had been advertised as stolen. Immediately he confessed his crimes; but regaining his nerve at the Old Bailey, he made a fluent speech in which he laid the blame for his crimes on Plunkett – who escaped and was never heard of again – and attributed his confession to a 'delirium and confusion' in his brain. Yet although there was much sympathy in court for the 'Gentleman Highwayman', and although Lady Caroline Petersham testified that she knew him well, had

often had him to her house and 'had never lost anything', he was condemned to death and hanged at Tyburn.

M'Lean was not the only parson's son to achieve notoriety as a highwayman. Two other typical 'knights of the road' were born in parsonages. Nicholas Horner, hanged at Exeter, was the son of the vicar of Honiton. And Paul Lewis, hanged at Tyburn, was 'the son of a worthy clergyman' of Hurstmonceaux. Both of them had been sent to good schools by fond parents, and, having shown no aptitude for study, had been procured good starts in a more active life – Horner in India, Lewis as an artillery officer. Both of them had chosen to spend their time gambling, drinking and whoring, until, dismissed from their respective employments and deep in debt, they took to the road.

Gambling debts, they confessed, had first induced them to 'go on the highway'. And gambling, as Henry Fielding, the Bow Street magistrate, confirmed, was the school in which most highwaymen were bred. William Parsons, for instance, the son of a baronet and nephew of the Duchess of Northumberland, had begun his criminal career soon after leaving Eton by stealing from his family and acquaintances to pay the debts he incurred at the gaming table.

Through his father's influence, Parsons acquired a commission in the Navy, which he was compelled to give up when caught cheating at cards. He was then found another appointment in Africa but was compelled to give up this, also, when he forged a guarantee from his aunt the Duchess. He came home, married a girl with money, and when he had spent most of it, bought a commission in the Army with the rest. Discovered forging another document to gain credit for gambling, he was arrested and sentenced to transportation to Virginia, where he soon escaped from confinement and stole Lord Fairfax's horse to become a highwayman in the American colonies. Successful in his new avocation, he returned home to try his luck on Hounslow Heath. Less successful there, however, he was caught and hanged at Tyburn.

Although few highwaymen were born with William Parsons'

advantages, there were very few who had begun life with no advantages at all.

Captain Alexander Smith's *Complete History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads, etc.* is full of anecdotes which defy acceptance by all but the most credulous reader, and of salacious legends which have been lifted intact from the pages of Giovanni Boccaccio. Despite their chap-book origins, however, the outlines of the careers Smith traces are authentic; and from his book there emerges confirmation not only of Lord Macaulay's assertion that the highwayman 'held an aristocratical position in the community of thieves', but also of the Duc de Lévis's belief that his birth and upbringing or acquired airs of gentility enabled him to maintain that position with authority.

Of the fifty-nine men in Smith's book whose principal criminal occupation was highway robbery, no less than thirty-two came from respectable homes, and eighteen of these were the sons of well-to-do gentlemen. Only one is known to have come from a criminal family, and only four (one of them the bastard son of an Irish priest) were cast loose upon the world at an early age. One other was apprenticed to a chimney-sweep as a climbing boy; but all the others, who had not been students or gentlemen of leisure, had been apprenticed to good trades or put to decent work. Six had been servants in the houses of the rich, three had been farmers, three butchers, two shoemakers and two tailors. Amongst the others there were two drapers, a grocer, two bricklayers, a baker, two clerks, a glovemaker, an upholsterer, six soldiers (one of them, an ensign, the natural son of a general and a parson's daughter), a goldsmith (the son of good Quaker parents), and a sailor (who had been educated at St Paul's).

Of those who had had no trade or paid employment, there were three undergraduates (one of Brasenose College, Oxford, one of King's College, Cambridge, the third – who had an income of £600 a year – of Trinity College, Cambridge), and three law students. The rest had lived idly on inherited money and had taken to the road when they had spent it.

What they all shared, with very few exceptions, was a strong taste for hard liquor, whores, and gambling, and a strong distaste for work. '*Do!*' his wife exclaimed when Joseph Picken had spent all his money and did not know what he could do to get any more, since the thought of work displeased him so. '*Do?* Why, what should any man do that wants money and has courage, but go upon the highway!' This seemed good advice to Picken, who followed it and was shortly afterwards hanged.

The careers of two highwaymen may, perhaps, be cited as characteristic. These were Ned Bonnet and Dick Adams, both of whom were executed in March 1713.

Bonnet, born of 'very good respectable parents' in the Isle of Ely, was an excellent horseman who knew the roads of Cambridgeshire 'by day and by night as if he was directed by a compass'. He had once owned a successful grocery business which had been ruined by fire, and he had turned highwayman to satisfy his creditors. 'However, having been upon several exploits wherein he was successful, the sweet profit of his enterprise made him so in love with robbery on the highway, that he devoted himself wholly to it, and committed above three hundred robberies, particularly in Cambridgeshire.'

Once, so it was alleged, he robbed an Anabaptist preacher whose canting homilies infuriated him. 'Don't talk of religious matters to me,' he told the preacher angrily. 'For I'll have you know that like all other true-bred gentlemen, I believe nothing at all of religion.'

The other typical example from Alexander Smith's egregious gallery, Dick Adams, was also born of 'very good and respectable parents' and was also proud to possess 'the mien and habit much of a gentleman.' He had once been footman to a duchess, but had run away with £200 worth of silks and brocades which he had ordered on her behalf. He had enlisted in the Guards when he had spent the profits and then, finding a guardsman's pay insufficient for his extravagant tastes, he had 'gone for highwayman'.

To have been a footman, like Adams, was a common prelude to a criminal career on the road. For footmen were as often as not chosen – as blackamoor servants were – to reflect credit on their masters by means of their striking physique and bearing rather than by virtue of any other qualities. And they were a notoriously arrogant and ungovernable set. One of their duties was to keep places for their masters and mistresses at the theatre, where, every evening, according to the *Weekly Register* for 25 March 1732, 'numbers of them are lolling over the boxes with their hats on, playing over the airs, taking snuff, laughing aloud, adjusting their cockscombs, or holding dialogues with their brethren from one side of the house to the other'. If their employers did not come to the play they remained where they were and carried on as noisily as ever; and if their employers *did* come, the footmen were allowed to go up to the pit. This privilege being denied them, on account of their rough behaviour, there was more than once a serious riot.

Required to be a walking advertisement of their employers' wealth, yet paid less a year than the daughter of the house might spend on her monkey's collar, it was natural that many footmen became tired of cutting a dash in livery which did not belong to them and sought means of acquiring wealth of their own. The famous John Rann, better known as 'Sixteen-String Jack', was one of these men.

Footman, and afterwards coachman, to a 'gentleman of fortune near Portman Square', Rann was 'about five feet five inches high, wore his own hair, of a light brown colour, which he combed over his forehead, was remarkably clean, and particularly neat in his dress, which in two instances was very singular, that of always having sixteen strings to his breeches' knees, always of silk (by which means he acquired his fictitious name) and a remarkable hat with strings, and a button on the crown. He was straight, of a genteel carriage, and makes a very handsome appearance.'

He was 'intitled', in the words of his biographer in the *Newgate Calendar*, 'to be classed among the impudent

and arrogant self-created gentlemen, who levied arbitrary contributions on the highway.'

Having been several times acquitted on charges of highway robbery, he appeared before a Bow Street Magistrate in May 1774, accused of having stolen money and a watch from John Devall, Esquire, on Hounslow Heath. Although there was strong evidence that he had, in fact, stolen the watch and given it to his mistress to pawn, Rann was again acquitted. He left Bow Street 'dressed in a manner above his stile of life and his circumstances', and with 'a bundle of flowers in the breast of his coat, almost as large as a broom'.

'On the Sunday following,' his biographer goes on, 'Rann appeared at Bagniggewells, dressed in a scarlet coat, tambour waistcoat, white silk stockings, laced hat, &c, and publicly declared himself to be a highwayman. Having drank pretty freely, he became extremely quarrelsome, and several scuffles ensued, in one of which he lost a ring from his finger, and when he discovered his loss, he said it was but an hundred guineas gone, which one evening's work would replace. He became at length so troublesome, that part of the company agreed to turn him out of the house; but they met with so obstinate a resistance, that they were obliged to give up their design. Then a number of young fellows, possessed of more spirit than discretion, attacked this magnanimous hero, and actually forced him through the window into the road. Rann was not much injured by this severe treatment; but he complained bitterly against those who could so affront a *gentleman* of his character.'

After six acquittals, 'Sixteen-String Jack' was arrested for the seventh time, and appeared in court 'dressed in a new suit of pea-green clothes, his hat bound round with silver strings; he wore a ruffled shirt, and his behaviour evidenced the utmost unconcern.'

This time he was condemned to death. But, true to the character of carefree gentleman which he had so zealously assumed, he maintained his unconcern to the end. On the Sunday after his sentence, he had seven girls to dine with him

in prison, where 'the company were remarkably cheerful; nor was Rann less joyous than his companions'.

On the morning of his execution he went to his death as a 'Knight of the Road' was expected to, looking calmly and bravely at the gallows as 'an object which he had long expected to see.'

# 2

# Duval, Turpin and Some Others

> 'Were one to make the slightest attempt at self-defence the ruffian would turn bridle and fly, but not before attempting to revenge himself by killing you.'
>
> *César de Saussure, c. 1726*

The German visitor Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz was always careful when travelling in England to divide his money into two parts, one to be put in a purse and hidden away, the other part to be 'destined for the collectors'.

César de Saussure, writing home to his family in Lausanne, stressed how important this was:

> 'Highwaymen are generally well mounted; one of them will stop a coach containing six or seven travellers. With one hand he will present a pistol, with the other his hat, asking the unfortunate travellers most politely for their purses or their lives. No one caring to run the risk of being killed or maimed, a share of every traveller's money is thrown into the hat, for were one to make the slightest attempt at self defence the ruffian would turn bridle and fly, but not before attempting to revenge himself by killing you . . . Where there are several highwaymen together, they will search you thoroughly and leave nothing. Again, others take only a part of what they find; but all these robbers ill-treat only those who try to defend themselves.'

Polite and gracious as a highwayman might seem, in fact,

travellers agreed that he only remained so as long as his demands were met. Argue with him, insult him, keep him waiting on the open, dangerous highway with his pistol in his hand and his black mask over his face, and you would soon recognize that a very different character lay beneath the polish of his manner and the flamboyance of his gallantry.

Alexander Smith was not alone in suggesting that many highwaymen reacted to a less than submissively polite acquiescence with a sudden outburst of alarming invective.

'God damn you!' they would shout. 'You double-refined sons of whores!', 'You suffocated dogs in doublets!', 'You sodomitical sons of bitches!', 'You poxy buggers', 'You spawn of Hell hatched by Beelzebub!'.

The hesitation of a lady to part with her purse might well be greeted by a string of equally fanciful and engaging but terrifying insults: 'You outlandish bitch! You toad's harslet! You strumpetting whore's abortion! You double-poxed long-arsed salivated bitch in grain!'

One notable highwayman who appears never to have given vent to such extravagant epithets was Jacob Halsey, the son of wealthy Quaker parents from Bedford. But although Halsey spoke in a more staid and dispassionate way than his fellow collectors, he was quite as brutal when disappointed. One day he approached a curate on the Oxford–Abingdon road and is alleged to have addressed him thus, 'Friend, taking thee to be some Philistine going to spoil an honest Israelite for tithes, I must make bold to spoil thee first; therefore, thou wicked one, deliver thy mammon to the righteous, that he may convert it to a better use than to exhaust it in gluttony and fine clothes, otherwise I must send thee to the bottomless pit, before thy time is come by the course of nature.'

On another occasion, having robbed a young woman, he prefaced his raping her by telling her, 'My pretty lamb, an insurrection of an unruly member obliges me to make use of you on an extraordinary occasion; therefore I must dismount thy alluring body, to the end I may come into thee.'

Of course, Captain Smith, who is our authority for these

speeches, like so many of his contemporaries, enjoyed making fun of Quakers; and put into Jacob Halsey's mouth a good deal more humbug or self-mockery than was cited as evidence at his trial. But there can be no doubt that Halsey was a vicious and violent man who nevertheless did use on the road the manner of speech to which his parents had accustomed him. We are told, for instance, that he once knocked a beadle to the ground after a savage fight, remarking, 'I see thou canst exercise thy long-staff pretty well, but I'll prevent thee from using thy short one tonight', and then nailed him to a tree by his foreskin. The story may not be true, but it is *ben trovato*.

Certainly an act of vengeful brutality after a less than easy collection was very common. Patrick Fleming, an Irishman, who was accused at his trial of having murdered five men, two women, and a fourteen-year-old boy, cut off the nose, lips, and ears of a man foolhardy enough to refuse him. Andrew Baynes, who took his victims' clothes if they travelled without money, would also thrash them with his crop if he discovered they had been trying to hide something from him. And Patrick O'Bryan, a deserter from the Coldstream Guards, having murdered a recalcitrant traveller, cut up his body with his sword. Later O'Bryan and his gang of highwaymen, hear- that a rich gentleman, Lancelot Wilmot of Trowbridge, kept a large sum of money in his house, forced their way into it, and tied up his five servants.

> 'Next they went into the room of the daughter, who was in bed; but O'Bryan being captivated by her extraordinary beauty, quoth he, "Before we tie and gag this pretty creature, I must make bold to rob her of her maidenhead." So whilst this villain was eagerly coming to the bedside, protesting that he loved her as he did his soul and designed her no more harm than he did himself, the modest virgin had wrapped herself up in the bedclothes as well as time would permit. And as he took her in one arm, and endeavoured to get his other hand between herself and the sheet, she made a very vigorous defence to save her honour, for though she could

not hinder him from often kissing, not only her face, but several other parts of her body, as by her struggling they came to be bare; yet by her nimbleness in shifting her posture, and employing his hands so well with her own, they could never attain to the liberty they chiefly strove for. She neither made great noise, bit or scratched, but appeared to be resolute, and her resistance was made with so much eagerness and in so much earnest, that the lascivious villain seeing there was nothing to be done without more violence, his lust incited him to downright brutish force; and no sooner had he obtained his will, by ravishing the young gentlewoman, but such was his barbarity, that he most inhumanly stabbed her. Then he and his companions murdered her father and mother. After this, taking away about £2,500 in gold and silver, they set fire to the house, burning it down to the ground, and in the flames also destroyed the poor servants.'

Nor was this sort of barbarity limited to highwaymen who, like Fleming, Baynes and O'Bryan, had started their criminal careers as footpads.

Captain Evan Evans, the well-educated son of a Welsh innkeeper, mercilessly beat a man who had the impudence to offer him no more than fivepence. Bob Congden, a Cambridge undergraduate, and the son of a gentleman from Midhurst, murdered his first victim, and when robbing a lady's maid, who begged him tearfully not to take her money, for it was all that she had been able to save in five years, he is reported to have shouted at her as he snatched the money, 'You whining bitch! How you throw your snot and snivel about for nothing at all!' Congden later murdered his landlady, her baby and her maid, before leaving his lodgings with everything of value that he could lay his hands on.

Gilder Roy, who came from a good Perthshire family, was said even to take a pride in murdering those who put up the least resistance. Once, on stopping a judge whose refusal to part with his valuables particularly annoyed him, he and his

companions stripped the coachman and two footmen naked, tied them up and threw them all into a pond where they drowned. Then he cut the coach to pieces, shot the horses, and hanged the judge.

John Withers, having forgotten to put on his mask while robbing a postman and fearing that he might later be identified, cut his victim's throat, sliced open his stomach, filled it with stones, and threw the body into a nearby stream.

Thomas Wilmot cut off the finger of a woman who angered him by wasting time as she fumbled with a diamond ring; and William Cady, the son of a surgeon and a Bachelor of Arts, shot a passenger in a coach who swallowed her wedding ring rather than that he should have it. Then he cut her open in order to retrieve it.

The characters and careers of Claude Duval and Dick Turpin, the most famous highwaymen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provide fitting examples of the wide divergence there was between legend and reality.

Duval was born in France in 1643 and went to England at the time of the Restoration as a footman in the service of a nobleman who had been living in exile in Paris. A man of extreme good looks, insolent charm, arrogant self-assurance, and overpowering sensuality, 'maids, widows and wives, the rich, the poor, the noble, the vulgar' all alike, according to a contemporary account, found him irresistible and submitted to his advances. As skilful a liar, cheat and card-sharper as he was a lover, he left his employer's service soon after arriving in England and thereafter lived by his wits and by crime. Countless stories were told of his daring and gallantry, none of them well authenticated, most of them to his credit. His biographer, Dr William Pope, Professor of Astronomy at Oxford, recounts the most familiar and improbable of them in these words:

> 'He with his squadron overtakes a coach, which they had set over night, having intelligence of a booty of four hundred pounds in it. In the coach was a knight, his lady, and only

one serving-maid, who, perceiving five horsemen making up to them, presently imagined that they were beset; and they were confirmed in this apprehension by seeing them whisper to one another, and ride backwards and forwards.

'The lady, to show that she was not afraid, takes a flageolet out of her pocket and plays. Du Vall takes the hint, plays also, and excellently well, upon a flageolet of his own, and in this posture he rides up to the coach-side.

' "Sir," says he to the person in the coach, "your lady plays excellently, and I doubt not but that she dances as well. Will you please to walk out of the coach and let me have the honour to dance one currant [coranto] with her upon the heath?"

' "Sir," said the person in the coach, "I dare not deny anything to one of your quality and good mind. You seem a gentleman, and your request is very reasonable."

'Which said, the lacquey opens the boot, out comes the knight, Du Vall leaps lightly off his horse and hands the lady out of the coach. They danced, and here it was that Du Vall performed marvels; the best master in London, except those that are French, not being able to show such footing as he did in his great French riding boots.

'The dancing being over, he waits on the lady to her coach. As the knight was going in, says Du Vall to him, "Sir, you have forgot to pay the musick."

' "No, I have not," replies the knight, and, putting his hand under the seat of the coach, pulls out a hundred pounds in a bag, and delivers it to him, which Du Vall took with a very good grace.'

Dr Pope's ironical treatment of Duval's exploits was intended, so he said, as 'a severe reflection on the too great fondness of English ladies towards French footmen . . . a too common complaint.' But most of the subsequent accounts of these exploits contain no irony and little condemnation. And when they come to deal with Duval's arrest, the authors of these chap-books are agreed that the only reason why their

hero cut so poor a figure on this occasion was that he was regrettably yet undeniably, indeed paralytically, drunk. If he had not been at such a disadvantage he would 'certainly have killed at least ten constables, and would have been cut as small as herbs for the pot before he would have yielded to the bailiff of Westminster.'

But he was drunk, and so, at the age of twenty-seven, he was cast for death.

So wide had been his fame that 'crowds of ladies visited him in the condemned hold; many more in masks were present at his execution. After hanging, he lay in state in the Tangier Tavern at St Giles, in a room draped with black and covered with escutcheons.'

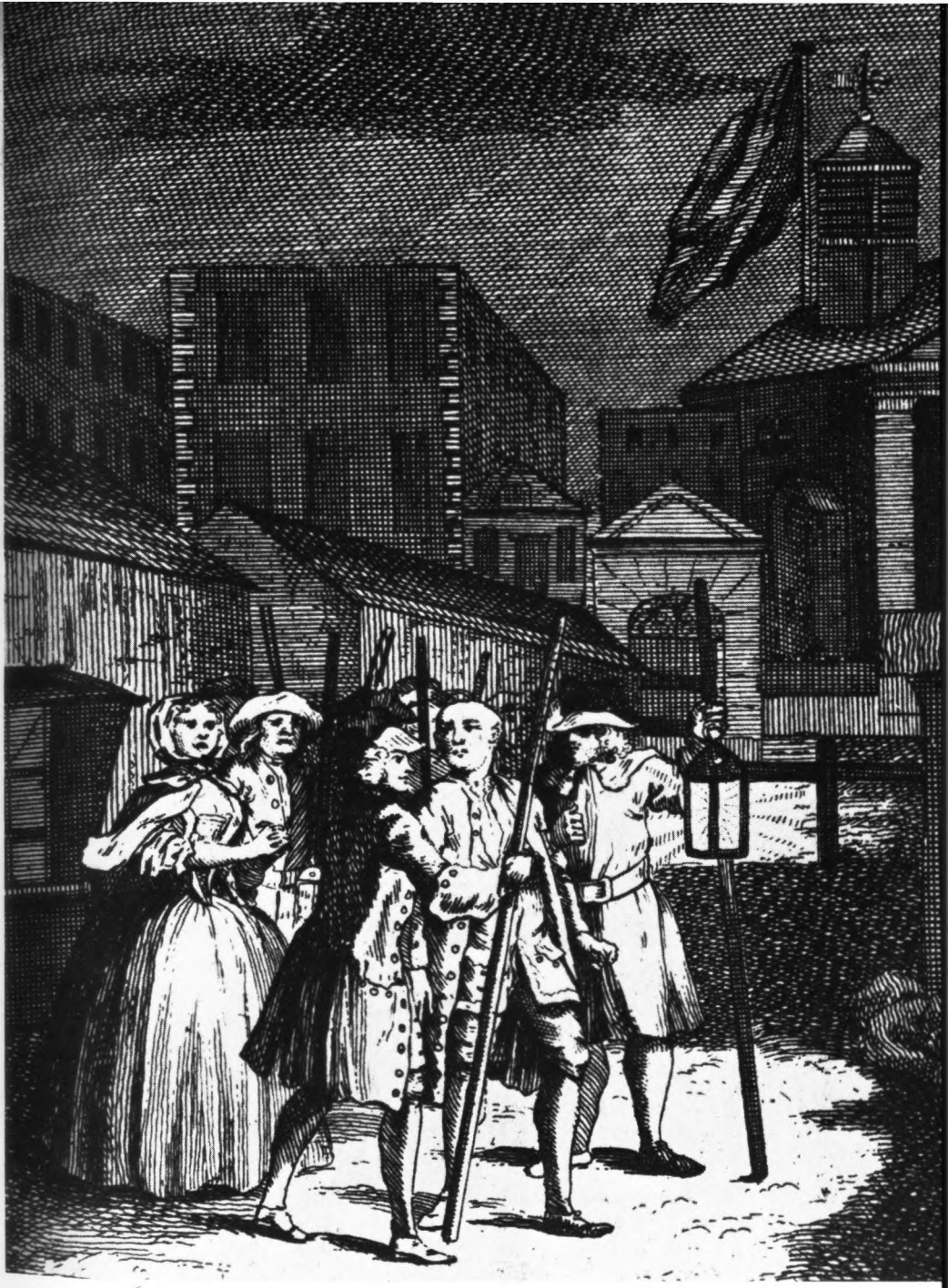
He was buried in the centre aisle of Covent Garden church under a stone with this epigraph:

*Here lies Du Vall: Reader, if male thou art,*
*Look to thy purse; if female, to thy Heart . . .*
*Old Tyburn's glory, England's illustrious thief,*
*Du Vall, the ladies' Joy, Du Vall the ladies' grief.*

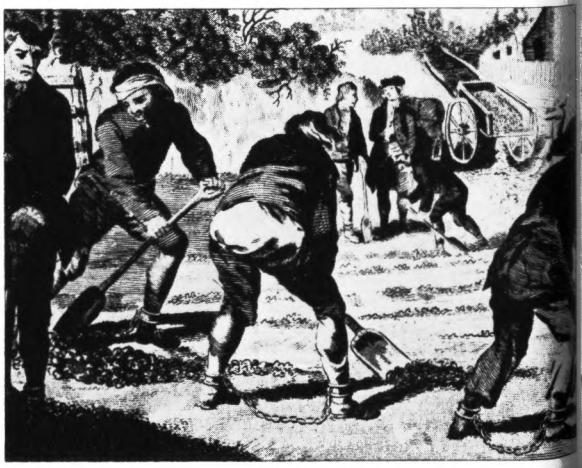
Samuel Butler wrote a 'Pindarick Ode' to his 'most renowned memory':

'. . . And yet the brave Du-Vall, whose name
Can never be worn out by fame,
That liv'd and dy'd, to leave behind
A great example to mankind;
That fell a public Sacrifice
From ruine to preserve those few,
Who though born false, may be made true,
And teach the world to be more just and wise;
Ought not like vulgar ashes rest
Unmention'd in his silent Chest,
Not for his own but public interest . . . '

Later writers, however, have not considered his career and popularity a subject for irony. Leigh Hunt, for example, commemorated him as 'an eternal feather in the cap of highway gentility', and a twentieth-century writer, Charles G. Harper,



Highwaymen were active in the centre of London as well as in the roads leading into it. Here one is arrested in Covent Garden



*above* Plate VI of Hogarth's series *The Rake's Progress*, showing the interior of White's Chocolate House as it was at the time of the fire of 1733. White's was a common haunt of highwaymen when they had money to spend. The highwayman sitting on the distraught rake's left, with a pair of pistols sticking out of his pocket, seems to have lost. Deep in thought he ignores the boy offering him a drink, the watchman's shout of fire, and the hubbub around him

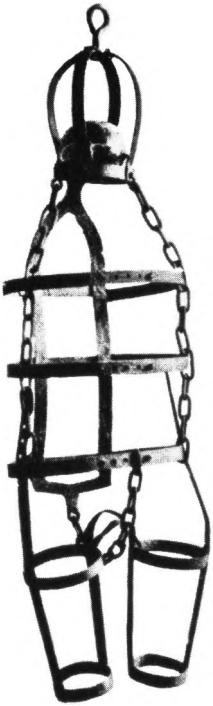
*opposite above* William Cox in the Press Yard at Newgate, where so many highwaymen, manacled like this, spent their last days

*opposite below* Other measures having proved ineffective, it was proposed to punish highwaymen by putting them to hard labour on the roads

*above* Vauxhall Gardens, from the drawing by Rowlandson. Highwaymen and their accomplices mingled with the crowd in all the London pleasure gardens, selecting victims to rob on their way home

*right* 'The Idle Apprentice executed at Tyburn', plate XI of William Hogarth's series *Industry and Idleness*, said to have been inspired by the career of the highwayman, burglar and prison-breaker, Jack Sheppard

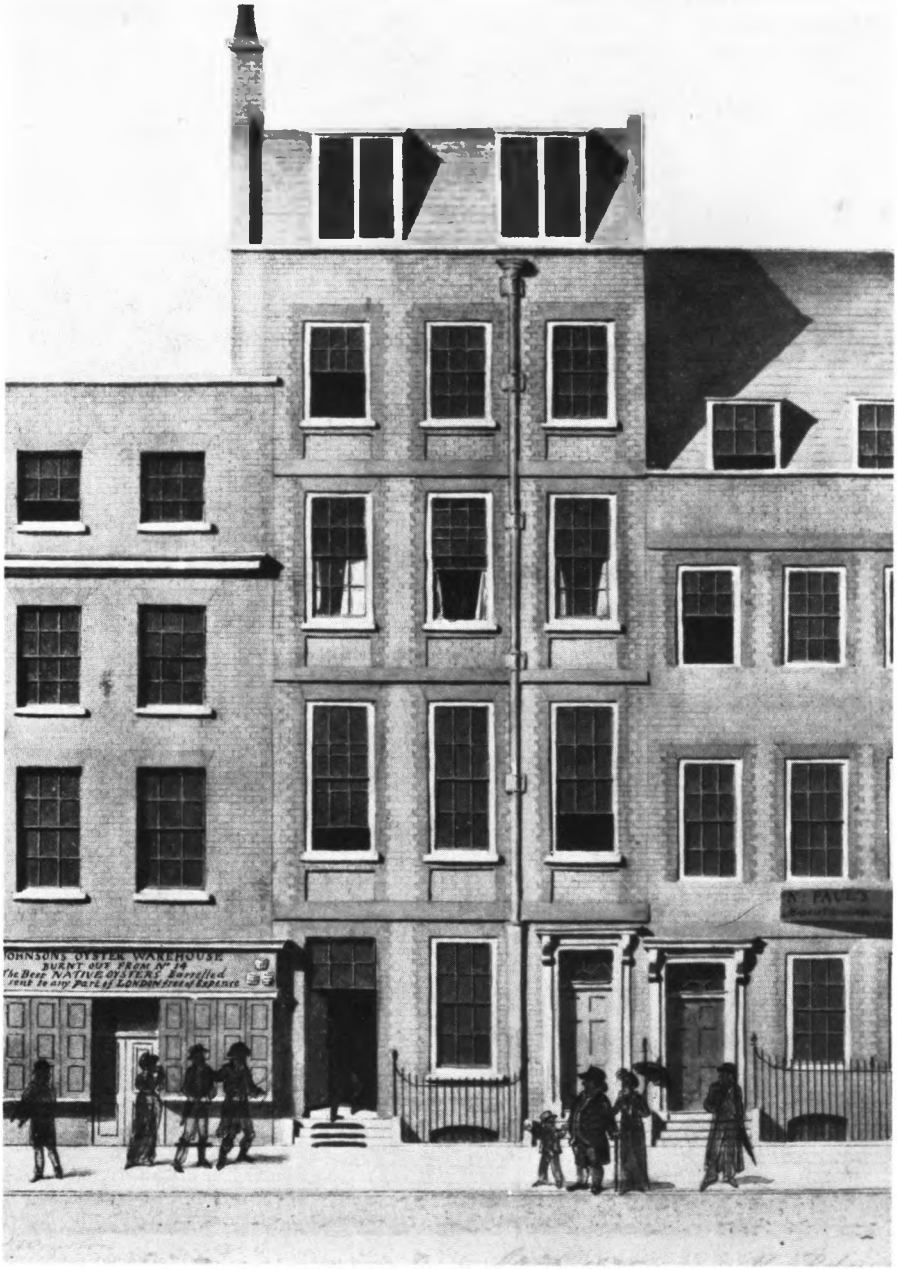
*right* A set of irons in which the bodies of hanged highwaymen were exhibited at the roadside as a deterrent to other potential offenders



The 'dreadful mementoes' of highwaymen hanged on gibbets, a common sight in eighteenth-century England, caused the living highwaymen only momentary concern

*right* Henry Fielding, the great novelist, was also a magistrate. The small police force he formed at Bow Street helped at last to clear the roads of highwaymen

Sir John Fielding, the 'Blind Beak', who continued the work of his half-brother Henry at Bow Street


JOHNSONS OYSTER WAREHOUSE
BURNT OUT FROM Nº 14
The Best NATIVE OYSTERS Barrelled
Sent to any Part of LONDON free of Expence

The Bow Street Public Office, headquarters of 'Mr Fielding's People'

as a man 'who ranks among his brother highwaymen as high as Rembrandt or Raphael among artists. He was, indeed, no less an artist in his own profession than they.'

A more revealing impression of Duval, however, is provided by a story in the *Newgate Calendar*, one of the few stories told of him which strikes an authentic note. From this it appears that, in company with several companions, he held up a carriage one day on Blackheath. In the carriage was a baby sucking milk from a feeding bottle. Having relieved the women of their money, Duval, noticing that the bottle was made of silver, snatched it from the baby's mouth. He would have kept it had not one of his companions, reminding him of the reputation which he was expected to maintain, persuaded him to give it back.

Just as Claude Duval was less the gracious gallant than he himself and his apologists pretended, so was Dick Turpin.

This dashing hero of Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Rookwood*, was born in Essex in 1705, the son of a farmer. He was given sufficient education to enable him to read and write, and to conduct himself, when it was in his interests to do so, as though he had been better schooled than was in fact the case.

Apprenticed to a butcher, by the time he was twenty-one he had his own shop which he took to stocking with the carcasses of sheep stolen from his neighbours. Eventually discovered in this practice by the servants of a nearby farmer, from one of whose fields he had driven two oxen, he was forced to flee the district. For a time he became a smuggler and then joined the notorious Essex Gang, who specialized in housebreaking with violence.

The activities of this gang, of which Turpin soon appointed himself leader, were reported in the London newspapers.

Here are two reports, both from the *London Evening Post* for 1735:

> 'On Saturday night last, about seven o'clock, five rogues entered the house of the Widow Shelley, at Loughton in Essex, having pistols, etc., and threatened to murder the old

lady if she did not tell them where her money lay; which she obstinately refusing for some time, they threatened to lay her across the fire if she did not instantly tell them which she would not do. [Turpin said to her, so it was recorded elsewhere, 'God damn your blood, you old bitch, if you won't tell me I'll set your arse on the grate.'] But her son being in the room, and threatened to be murdered, cried out, he would tell them if they would not murder his mother, and did; whereupon they went upstairs and took near £100, a silver tankard, and other plate, and all manner of household goods. They afterwards went into the cellar, and drank several bottles of ale and wine . . .'

'On Tuesday night, about eight o'clock, five villains came to the house of Mr Lawrence, a farmer at Edgewarebury, near Edgware, in Middlesex, but the door being bolted they could not get in, so they went to the boy who was in the sheep-house, and compelled him to call the maid, who opened the door, upon which they rushed in, bound the master, maid, and one manservant, and swore they would murder all the family if they did not discover their money etc.; they trod the bedding under foot, in case there should be money hidden in it, and took about £10 in money, linen, etc., all they could lay their hands on, broke the old man's head, dragged him about the house, emptied a kettle of water from the fire over him, which had fortunately only just been placed on it, and ravished the maid, Dorothy Street, using her in a most barbarous manner, and then went off.'

The last of the robberies which the Essex Gang committed is reported in *The Newgate Calendar*:

'On the 7th of February [1736] six of them assembled at the White-Bear Inn in Drury Lane, where they agreed to rob the house of Mr Francis, a farmer near Marylebone. Arriving at the place, they found a servant in the cow-house, whom they bound fast, and threatened to murder him if he was not perfectly silent . . .

'In the interim Mr Francis happening to come home, they presented their pistols to his breast, and threatened instant destruction to him, if he made the least noise or opposition.

'Having bound the master in the stable, they rushed into the house, tied Mrs Francis, her daughter, and the maid-servant, and beat them in a most cruel manner. One of the thieves stood as sentry while the rest rifled the house . . .

'Hereupon a reward of an hundred pounds was offered for the apprehension of the offenders; in consequence of which two of them were taken into custody, tried, convicted on the evidence of an accomplice, and hanged in chains . . .'

Turpin himself escaped arrest by jumping out of a window, and, making for Cambridgeshire, he determined to try his luck as a highwayman in a different part of the country.

His first intended victim (or so it was said: the story is told of other highwaymen, but such mistakes were doubtless common) turned out to be another well-dressed, well-mounted robber who laughed in his face. 'What, dog eat dog?' protested this man, Tom King. 'Come, come, brother Turpin; if you don't know me, I know you, and shall be glad of your company.'

So Turpin and King became partners, setting up their head-quarters in a cave in Epping Forest and robbing those who passed along the roads below with such success that even the pedlars took to carrying pistols.

Tempted by an offer of £100 reward for his capture two men determined to seek out Turpin's hiding-place, which they eventually succeeded in discovering. But, seeing them approach it and believing them to be poachers, Turpin called out that there were no hares in that thicket. 'No,' said one of them. 'But I have found a Turpin!' And he called upon him to give himself up.

Pretending that he was willing to do so, Turpin backed away towards his cave, speaking to them all the time in a friendly way, until he had put his hand on the gun which he always kept loaded at its entrance. Quickly picking it up, he

fired, shot one of his would-be captors dead, while the other ran away as fast as he could.

Undeterred by this near-capture, Turpin, sometimes with King, sometimes with another highwayman named Bowden, continued with his robberies on the various roads leading out of London, aggravating a reputation for brutality which he had earned with the Essex Gang.

'On Monday, Mr Omar, of Southwark,' the *Grub Street Journal* reported on 24 July 1736, 'meeting between Barnes Common and Wandsworth, Turpin the Butcher, with another person, clapt spurs to his horse, but they coming up with him, obliged him to dismount, and Turpin, suspecting that he knew him, would have shot him, but was prevented by the other, who pulled the pistol out of his hand.'

A few months later the same paper informed its readers that 'for about six weeks past Blackheath has been so infested by two highwaymen (Supposed to be Bowden and Turpin) that 'tis dangerous for travellers to pass. On Thursday Turpin and Bowden had the insolence to ride through the City at noonday, and in Watling Street they were known by two or three porters, who had not the courage to attack them; they were indifferently mounted, and went towards the bridge, so 'tis thought are gone the Tonbridge road.'

Early the following year, the *Country Journal* reported that 'the famous Turpin and a new companion of his came up and attacked the coach, in order to rob it, the gentleman had a carbine in the coach, loaded with slugs, and seeing them coming, got it ready, and presented it at Turpin, on stopping the coach, but it flashed in the pan; upon which says Turpin, "God damn you, you have missed me, but I won't you," and shot into the coach at him, but the ball missed him, passing between him and a lady in the coach.'

In May 1737 Turpin shot King by accident in a scuffle with a constable; but he carried on robbing on his own, and in June a reward of £200 and a pardon to any of his accomplices was offered by Royal Proclamation for his capture.

Soon after the publication of this offer, Turpin decided that

life was becoming too dangerous for him in the south, so he moved to Welton in Yorkshire where he 'assumed the character of a gentleman', making a good living by stealing horses in Lincolnshire and bringing them across the county border to sell in the markets near his new home-town.

But although John Palmer, as Turpin now called himself, was accepted by the rough squires of Yorkshire as their social equal, and although he was a fine horseman and an expert shot, there were occasions when they found his conduct surprising even by their undemanding standards of behaviour. One evening, for example, returning from a shoot, he idly fired at a cock belonging to his landlord and killed it. When a neighbour made some mildly disapproving comment, Turpin turned on him angrily and said if he would just mind standing still for a moment while he reloaded his gun he would take pleasure in shooting him too.

This incident led to his arrest, his imprisonment in York Castle, the discovery of his true name, his trial and execution.

Although the real Dick Turpin, squat, swarthy and 'very much marked with smallpox', was a far less romantic figure than the brave, misjudged hero of legend, he did, at least, go to meet his death in the grand, traditional style.

While a prisoner in York Castle, he 'lived in the most gay and thoughtless manner after conviction, regardless of all considerations of futurity, and affecting to make a jest of the dreadful fate that awaited him.'

A few days before his execution he bought himself a new suit and a pair of new shoes; he hired five poor men, at ten shillings each, to follow him to the gallows as mourners; he gave hatbands and gloves to several other people; and when the last morning came, and he was drawn to the place of execution, he stood up in the cart bowing to the spectators 'with an air of the most astonishing indifference and intrepidity'.

As he climbed the ladder his right leg began to tremble; but he stamped it down impatiently, and stood talking quite calmly to the executioner for half an hour. Then, with carefree grace, he jumped off the ladder and died within a few minutes.

# 3

# Methods and Mistakes

'Having taken a solemn Oath to be true to one another, their next Business is to acquaint themselves, by Tapsters, Hostlers, Chamberlains, or others, what Booties are stirring, how contained, and whether bound. But before they attempt the Seizure, if there be any Novices in the Company, then they are instructed by the more experienced, as I was at first.'

*Francis Jackson, 1674*

Brave as he often proved himself to be at his death, and dashingly gallant as he chose to pretend to be in life, the highwayman was rarely a successful criminal. Many highwaymen had uninterrupted runs of luck, like 'The Flying Highwayman', who, in the words of *The Annual Register* for 1761, 'engrosses the conversation of most of the towns within twenty miles of London, as he has occasionally visited all the public roads round this metropolis, and has collected several considerable sums. He robs upon three different horses, a grey, a sorrel, and a black one, the last of which has a bald face, to hide which, he generally hangs on a black cat's skin; he has leaped over Colnbrook turnpike a dozen times within this fortnight, and is now well known by most of the turnpike men in the different roads about town.'

But 'The Flying Highwayman' was caught soon after this report was written. And many less well-known highwaymen were caught within a few weeks of their first taking to the road. Scarcely any of them took the trouble to devise new methods of robbing on the highway, relying solely on a pistol

to intimidate their victim, a black mask for disguise, and a fast horse for escape.

There were exceptions, of course. The sixteenth-century highwayman Gamaliel Ratsey, the son of a Lincolnshire squire, wore a mask on which were depicted such frighteningly hideous features that his pistol and sword were almost superfluous. William Davis, who worked as a farmer by day, would ride for miles beside an intended victim, talking amiably, lulling suspicion, until he reached a concealed, secluded part of the road where he would turn upon him suddenly with frightful curses and threats. William Page, who was executed in 1758, trained himself to be an expert cartographer, and was found to possess detailed maps, all drawn by himself, of every road within twenty miles of London. He went out to rob in a phaeton and pair which he would leave close by his chosen place of ambush; and after his robbery he would return, remove his mask, change his clothes and his wig, and ride home at leisure. Some highwaymen robbed in disguise: Jack Collet as a bishop with four or five companions dressed as his servants and chaplain; Tom Rowland and Thomas Sympson as women.

Sympson, a very handsome young man of most delicate features, certainly looked like a woman and, according to his biographers, he cut an extremely attractive figure in his petticoats and bodice. The most celebrated story about him is that one day, in Bath, he heard that a rich peer was about to leave the town for London. Having put on his female disguise, he caught the eye of the peer, who invited him into his coach. His Lordship made a suggestion to his young companion, who replied that it would be an honour to gratify the request 'but that to expose herself before half a dozen attendants that were with his honour, she would not for the world.'

So the peer stopped the coach, took Sympson into a nearby wood, and 'for an introduction to the fount of pleasure, was for taking up the petticoats.' Discovering his mistake he exclaimed, 'What a plague's the meaning of your wearing breeches, madam?'

'Nothing,' Sympson replied, 'but to put your money in,' which he proceeded to do, and then ran off. A few years later he was hanged.

While Thomas Sympson chose to disguise himself as a woman to commit his robberies, Mary Frith, or 'Moll Cutpurse', to use the name by which she was universally known in Jacobean London, disguised herself as a man. By all accounts she did not need much disguise. A big, strong, ugly woman, 'mighty taken with the pastime of smoking, because of its singularity, and that no woman ever smoked before her', she began her criminal career as a pickpocket. But finding that the fences gave only a small proportion of their value for stolen goods, she set up as a receiver herself and soon made a fortune.

She bought a large house, covered its walls with looking-glasses, employed three maidservants and a footman, and amused herself with lovers, both male and female, and with her adventures on the road. By 1610, when she was about twenty-six, she had become so famous that Middleton and Dekker wrote a play about her, which, in tribute to a tremendously powerful voice that was capable 'of drowning all the city', they called *The Roaring Girle*.

Two years later she was forced to do penance at St Paul's Cross, fortifying herself beforehand by drinking six pints of sack. But this is a rare instance of her being punished. As a highwaywoman she seems, indeed, to have been more successful than any of her eighteenth-century male successors. At the age of sixty she is said not only to have been still active on the highway, but to have held up General Fairfax on Hounslow Heath, and to have robbed him of all that he had on him after shooting him in the arm. After this exploit she was caught and arrested but bought her way out of trouble for £2,000.

She died of dropsy in 1659 at the age of seventy-five, leaving a handsome bequest to her friends so that they could celebrate the return of the King, and asking them to bury her with her breach pointing upwards so that she would be as preposterous in her death as she had been all along in her life.

It was her money that had saved her from an earlier death;

and it was money, the highwayman Francis Jackson suggested in his published confessions, that could save any highwayman from the gallows provided he had not committed treason or murder. 'He can't be hanged,' Jackson said, 'who hath Five Hundred Pounds at his Command.'

Jackson's maxim contained in his *Recantation*, published in 1674, was sound enough. But few of his companions or successors ever succeeded in amassing £500; and those who did could not bear to leave it unspent for long. For – as Jackson said himself in this account of his erstwhile colleagues' methods and the travellers' means of protection against them – all highwaymen were wildly prodigal. 'London, the more is the pity, is their best Sanctuary [because of] the largeness of the City, and the little cognizance one takes of another there . . . and therefore after any Robbery, they commonly repair thither; having as many Names as Lodgings, and both as changeable as a Whore's Dalliance. Their next care is to buy variety of splendid Apparel, and, having bought his wench a new gown, and furnished her Pockets with Guynnies, they then prosecute to the height all manner of Debaucheries. And as their Whore, so must their host participate with them in their gain, else all the fat is in the Fire; for the Vintner, Innkeeper, etc., knowing very well what they are, and how easily they get their Money, will be sure to enlarge their reckoning and make it swell prodigiously; neither must this be complained of, lest they refuse to keep their own Counsel any longer.'

Jackson's book goes on to provide an excellent account of how the enterprising highwayman set about his work. If he intended to act with accomplices he ensured that he obtained from them a solemn oath that they would keep silent should they be arrested. If forced to speak they must give false names, false descriptions and false addresses so that 'the danger of the Tryal may be over ere sufficient Inquiry can be made'.

'If there be any Novices in the Company,' Jackson continues, 'then they are instructed by the more experienced, as I was at first, after this manner.

'In the first place, you must have a variety of Periwigs in your Lodgings, and the like you must carry abroad, if occasion require the necessity of changing the colour of the hair; neither must you be without your false Beards of several colours; for want of them, you may only cross your locks athwart your mouth, which is a good disguise: Patches contribute much thereto. And least your Voice should be known another time by him that is robbed, put into your mouth a Pebble, or any suchlike thing, which will alter your tone advantagiously to your purpose.

'Being thus provided, a Watch-word must be fram'd; wrapt in some question, as, "What's-a Clock?" or "*Jack*, what shall we have for Supper?" to avoid putting the Traveller into suspicion; which, as soon named, you must instantly fall to work, seizing with your left hand the Bridle, and with your right presenting a Pistol. This so terrifies that he delivers instantly, for who will trust a Pistol at his Breast loaded with a brace of Bullets, and a mouth discharging at the same time volleys of Oaths, that if he deliver not instantly he is a dead man?'

The prudent highwayman will not, however, fire his pistol 'for fear of provoking the Law to an implacability', and of making it more difficult to procure mercy from the bench. But he will not hesitate to use violence if his demands are not immediately met, to drag his victim off his horse or out of his carriage and into a ditch where he will search him 'so severely that nothing can be hidden'. Then, exchanging horses with the victim, if his horse is better, he makes him swear not to follow him nor to raise the country with a hue and cry.

'Another way of setting they have. The Gang shall ride before, out of sight, leaving one lusty Fellow of their company behind, who shall ride very softly, expecting some Person or other who shall overtake him. If three or four, he will single out one he thinks hath the most Money; and, pretending much kindness, whispers him in the ear, saying he likes not those other men, and asks if he knows them. If not, he adviseth him

by all means to slacken his Pace, for certainly they are dangerous Fellows. This timorous piece of credulity thanks him for his present care, and takes his Advice; and not long after, brings him to the Place where the confederates lie in ambuscado, who upon sight of them draws, bidding the other to do the like, and now begins a dangerous Fight, as the Traveller imagines, who through fear of Bloodshed delivers his Money, and persuades his champion to do the like, who, with much ado, at length condescends thereto. Having given him a private Item which way they intend to ride, they set Spurs to their Horses, and are out of sight in an Instant.

'Hereupon, this Pretender to Honesty will straight persuade you to assist him in making a Hue-and-Cry, in the carrying on of which to the same he will be the foremost, as seemingly most zealous in the apprehension of these Robbers, to no other end than to lead you quite another way, till his Brethren be out of all danger. I knew one notorious Rogue (but by his sly and crafty Deportment was looked upon to be a very honest Gentleman ) suffered himself to be robbed with three more, by four of his own Confederates.'

In the event of his being caught the highwayman must have a sad and moving speech ready to soften the hearts of the court. 'There must be a plausible account given, how you fell into this course of Life; fetching a deep sigh, saying, "That you were well born, but by reason of your Family falling to decay you were exposed to great Want, and rather than shamefully beg (for you knew not how to labour) , you were constrained to take this course as a Subsistence; that it is your first fault, which you are heartily sorry for, and will never attempt the like again".'

Having shown how the highwaymen set about their business, Jackson then offers a few hints to travellers who might fall foul of them. If you must carry money with you, he advises, never tell anyone how much, where you are going, or when you intend setting out. Do not even say good-bye to anyone for fear you are overheard or lest the man you thought was your friend betrays you for a share of the money stolen.

Do not travel on a Sunday for that is the day of greatest danger. The highwayman prefers that day to rob since he knows the roads will be quieter and that he will be able to escape more easily. He knows, too, that the county authorities will not put themselves out to capture him, as the Sunday Trading Act relieves them of the responsibility of reimbursing the victim, and that those who do travel are likely to be 'about some eminent concern, and to that end carry a considerable sum about them.'[1]

Once on the road, 'be shy of those who are prone in pressing into your Company. It is more safe to entertain such who are unwilling to associate themselves with you.' If you do suspect your companions 'halt a little, and in your stay observe whether they still hold on their Course, or slack their Pace, or, it may be, alight and walk with their Horses in their Hands. If you observe any of these, you may conclude them the justly suspected Marks of a Highwayman.'

'Beware of all you meet on the road who act in the least strangely, who do not look you in the eye, who seem to be playing some part. Do not travel alone; but do not huddle together in a group; the best way is to ride in pairs a little way apart. Above all do not rely on the watchmen who are sometimes stationed by the Justices of the Peace at places where robberies have been committed in the past. Every highwayman knows that these watchmen are silly old decrepit men who will run away rather than fight. I have seen a dozen of them stand with Halberds in their Hands,' Jackson boasts, 'yet have we robbed before their very Faces, and they stand still the while, not daring to oppose us in the least.' Indeed, Jackson claims that once he and his companions set upon the watch, tied the old men up, and took their places. 'Standing

[1] A century later, in 1784, a foreign visitor, the French scientist Faujas de Saint Fond, said that, on the contrary, Sunday was the best day to travel. He agreed that Sunday night was the 'time when highwaymen usually come upon the road to rob the imprudent traveller. They are known to be numerous, and to carry on their dangerous profession upon horseback, often even mounted on hunters; but,' he went on, 'we were informed that, though our danger would have been great on the evening before, we were safe that night, which was Sunday, when the roads are covered with people of all ranks.'

with our Brown-bills, as with Authority, we stopped whom we pleased.'

Should the traveller be unfortunate enough to be robbed on the way into London (where, as he said, most highway robberies were committed because of the opportunities for hiding in the capital) Jackson advises him how to pursue with hue and cry:

'If you are set upon and rob'd in the Eastern quarter, take not that Road in which you were to *London*, nor raise the Country thereabout, for it is to no purpose; but ride with all speed to Holborn, Strand, St James's or Westminster, and then search with all diligence. If you are rob'd travelling the North, never search any place in the City, but make all convenient speed to the Bank-side, Southwark, Lambeth, or Fox-Hall; by there planting themselves, they know, or think at least, they are sufficiently secure, having the City between them and you.'

Jackson ends his book with some advice to innkeepers, telling them how to distinguish highwaymen from honest travellers:

'In the first Place, observe their curiosity about their Horses, in dressing and feeding them: next you will find them asking of Questions as who owns that Horse, and who the other; what their Masters are; whither travelling; and when will they set out. These are infallible signs of a Highwayman. Nor must I omit this remark: Let the Ostler [look into] their Cloak-bags, and he shall find them empty, for they carry only for show, and not to burden their Horses.

'Next, let the Chamberlain take notice when he shows them to a Room, that they will soon dismiss him, and after that, let him listen awhile and he shall hear the gingling of Money; and if he can but get a peep-hole for his eyes, he shall see them sharing their Booty.

'It will be very requisite to inquire severally each one's particular Name, and let your servants do the like. By this means you find them tripping, for they may easily forget a Name they borrowed that very day.

'At Supper-time let some one knock furiously and hastily at the Gate; then mark them well, and you shall see them start, their countenances change, and nothing but Fear and Amazement appearing in each Face; by which you may positively conclude them what you before did but imagine and suspect.

'If in the Day-time they come into your Inn, you may guess what they are by their trifling away their time, and staying somewhat longer than is requisite for Baiting. You shall observe them sometimes looking out of the Window, sometimes standing at the Gate, for no other end but to mark what Passengers Ride by. If they see any person of Quality to Ride that way, or the garb discovers anything of a booty, you shall have them presently in all haste, as alarm'd to Horse, mount presently, as if some dear Friend or near Relation was just rid by, whom they must endeavour to overtake.'

Although Francis Jackson seems by his own account to have been an imaginative robber, few of his eighteenth-century successors were. 'Gentlemen do not resort to trickery,' one of them said at his trial when asked why he had taken so little trouble to avoid detection. 'Highwaymen are honest thieves.' It was, indeed, their reliance on the most simple of their traditional methods that enabled the police – when, at last, there was a competent police – to keep the roads of England clear of them.

# 4

# Mr Fielding's People

> 'What is almost incredible, notwithstanding the gentleman was not twenty yards from him in the town of Hounslow, and kept crying out "Highwayman! Highwayman!" as he pursued him, yet no one had spirit enough to join the pursuit, no more than if all the inhabitants had been interested in the highwayman's escape.'
>
> *Sir John Fielding*
> *Bow Street Magistrate, 1755*

In *Romany Rye*, George Borrow's ostler gives three main reasons for the decline in the number of highwaymen on the roads: 'the refusal to licence houses which were known to afford shelter to highwaymen; the inclosure of many a wild heath in the country, and particularly the establishing in the neighbourhood of London of a well-armed mounted patrol.'

He was right to give precedence to the mounted patrol. This had been a long time coming; and had it come earlier the highwayman would not have survived so long.

For generations Englishmen had firmly resisted the establishment of a professional police force. Fear of tyranny, devotion to their concept of freedom, as well as a dread of change had made them peculiarly responsive to the warnings of those who saw in the police forces of Europe a terrible threat to individual liberty. The very word 'police' – a French word not used in official English until 1714 – was, in its modern sense, unknown. Also it was feared, and frequently suggested, that the cost of a professional police force would be ruinous. The loss of hundreds of thousands of goods and money stolen each year was more acceptable than the

supposedly prohibitive cost of paying enough men to prevent it. Far better, it was felt, to rely on those traditional methods which had been established by law and custom for centuries.

One of the oldest of these methods – even older than the Statute of Winchester of 1285 – was to rely on the people themselves acting as their own policemen by making them collectively responsible for crimes committed in their neighbourhood, both by requiring them to bring the criminal to justice and by placing upon them the responsibility of reimbursing the victim.

César de Saussure explained to his family the operation of this 'queer law to encourage counties to get rid of thieves'.

If a person 'is robbed of a considerable sum in the daytime and on the high road,' he said, 'and if he declares the theft to the sheriff of the county before the sun sets, and can prove that the sum has been taken from him in such and such a place, the county in which he has been robbed is obliged to refund him the sum. This happened to a friend of mine, who was robbed of two hundred guineas. Being able to declare the theft, and to prove it before the sun went down, he had no difficulty in recovering the amount from the sheriff of the county of Hertfordshire.'

This method, satisfactory enough to the traveller who could prove that he had been robbed on the highway, was open to much objection and abuse. And some highwaymen themselves, more enterprising than most, learned to profit from its weaknesses by coming to agreements with dishonest travellers and defrauding the county to their mutual profit. So, as the eighteenth century progressed, more and more reliance was placed upon the common informer and the payment of rewards to all those who brought criminals to justice.

The common informer had been recognized as early as the seventh century by the laws of Wihtred; but it was not until the reign of William and Mary that the system of rewards was given a firm legal basis by an act which offered £40 for the conviction of a highwayman. The informer to whom the reward was given also received the highwayman's horse,

# THE BEGGARS OPERA

Brittons attend — view this harmonious Stage
And listen to those notes which charm the age
Thus shall your taste in Sounds & Sense be shown
And Beggar's Opras ever be your own.

'The Beggar's Opera Burlesqued', from the engraving by William Hogarth. Macheath is shown with an ass's head. On one side in the audience are various gentlemen showing their appreciation of the production; on the other are some tradesmen evincing similar pleasure. Apollo and one of the muses are fast asleep beneath the stage. In the background a man shows his contempt for Newgate ballads by the use he makes of them

John Gay, author of *The Beggar's Opera*, the most successful theatrical production of the eighteenth century, whose hero was the gallant highwayman Captain Macheath

W. H. Ainsworth
Author of "Rookwood".

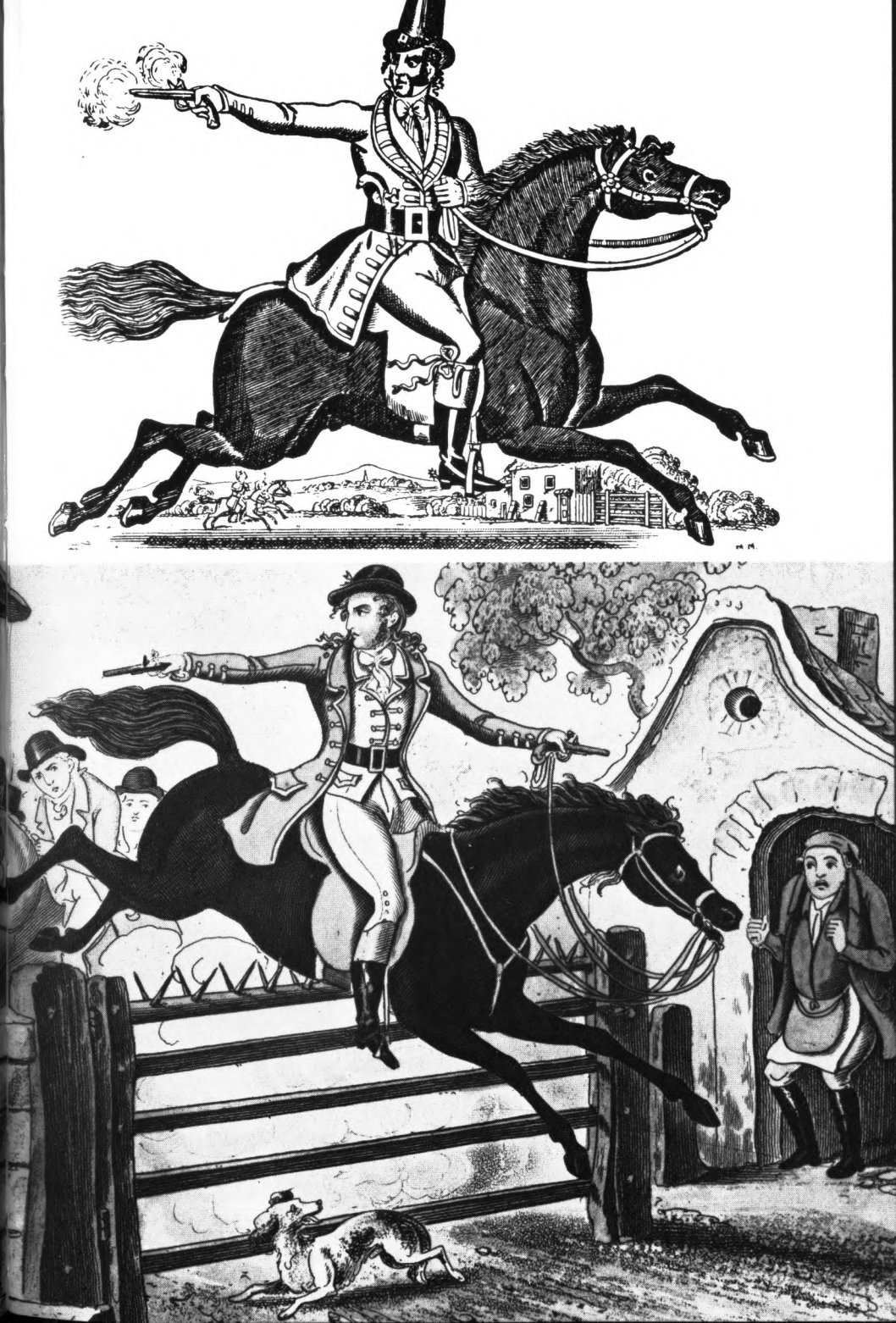
Two of George Cruikshank's illustrations for Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood: above* Dick Turpin's flight through Edmonton, and *below* the death of Black Bess

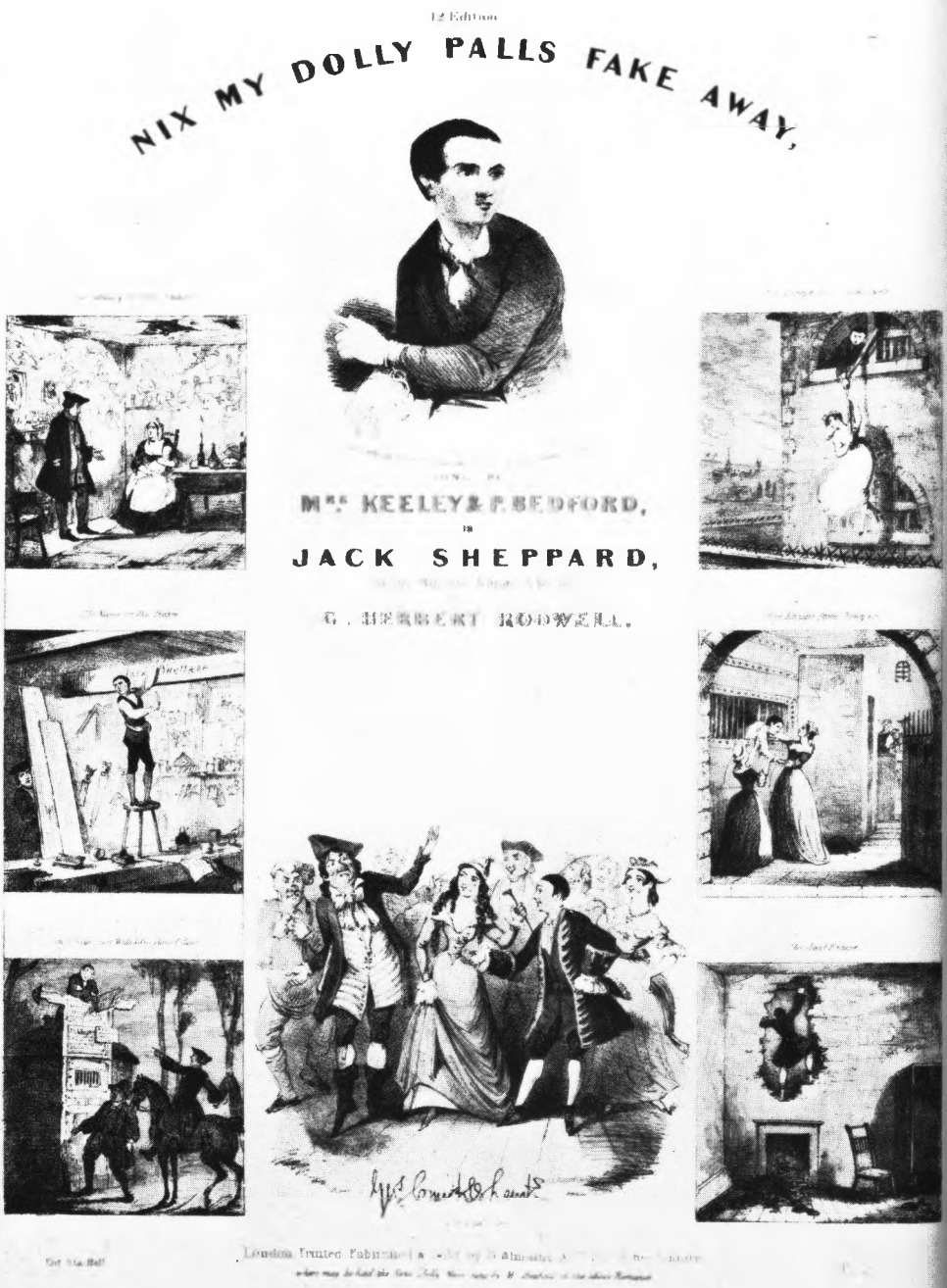
*opposite* William Harrison Ainsworth, author of *Rookwood* and *Jack Sheppard*, two of the most famous 'criminal romances' of the nineteenth century. From the sketch by Daniel Maclise in *Fraser's Magazine*, 1834. Ainsworth sits beneath a picture of his hero, Dick Turpin, and the tools of the highwayman's trade

*opposite* Dick Turpin, the brutal butcher, whom Harrison Ainsworth idealised as a 'hero of the turf' in his novel *Rookwood*

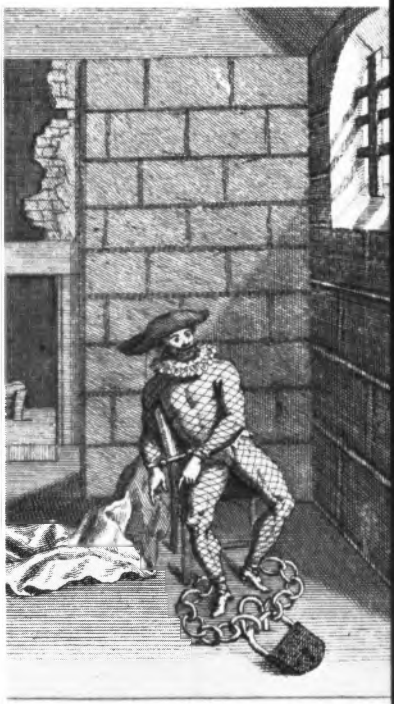
*below left* Dick Turpin in the cave in Epping Forest from which he set out to rob anyone who passed along the roads below

*below right* Dick Turpin clearing Hornsey Gate, one of the dramatic scenes in Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood*






'Nix My Dolly Palls Fake Away!'—'Who cares fellows, theive away as usual!'—was the hit song of the 1839 musical, *Jack Sheppard*, starring Mrs Keeley and Paul Bedford as 'Blueskin' Blake



Jack Sheppard was the hero of numerous plays and musical comedies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first was *Harlequin Sheppard*, performed at Drury Lane in 1724 within a fortnight of Sheppard's death

A painting and a sketch of Jack Sheppard, whose exploits were romanticised by Harrison Ainsworth. The artist was Sir James Thornhill, Sergeant Painter to the Crown

The prison scene from *The Beggar's Opera* showing Polly and Lucy pleading for Macheath's life. From the picture by Hogarth

weapons and money (unless it could be proved that they had been stolen) as well as a free pardon.

This important act – and several other measures which followed it providing rewards for a variety of offences besides highway robbery – established a new kind of private policeman, the thief-taker. Within a few years thief-taking had become a highly profitable profession. The man who had first shown just how profitable it could be was Jonathan Wild.

Wild was born in Wolverhampton in 1683, the son of a carpenter. He was apprenticed at the age of fifteen to a buckle-maker in Birmingham and while he was still in his apprenticeship married and had a son. Deserting his family for a more exciting life, he set off for London, where he was soon in debt and imprisoned in the Wood Street Compter. While in prison he made friends with Mary Milliner, a prostitute with a detailed knowledge of the criminal world and its denizens; and on being released he decided to go into partnership with her.

'The first business they went upon together was that of the buttock and twang or in other words the whore's bully'. They had soon made enough money to open a brothel in Lewkenors Lane and a receiving home for stolen goods, which was also a brothel, in Cock Alley.

First in association with Charles Hitchen, a homosexual City Marshal who used his office as a source of personal profit, and then on his own account, Wild used his unrivalled knowledge of the London underworld to become what he himself called 'Thief-Taker General of Great Britain and Ireland'.

It was not an exaggerated boast. How many convictions he secured can never be estimated; but in a petition to the Lord Mayor, in which he said that he was 'very desirous of becoming a freeman of this honourable city', he drew attention to the undoubted fact that he had sent over sixty criminals to the gallows.

Many of these criminals were highwaymen. For Wild's purpose was not only to make money out of thief-taking but

also to keep control of his criminal empire. By threatening those who tried to cheat him, or who refused to work for him, with 'the feel of the hangman's hemp' he kept his enemies in fear of him and his own men wary of his power. Highwaymen, notoriously independent and too jealous of their reputation to be organized by so vulgar and pretentious a ruffian, declined to submit to his direction.

They paid the consequences. He hunted them down with strenuous animosity, and with each one convicted he increased his fortune by £40, at the same time providing the underworld with an object lesson in the consequences of disobedience and independence.

By the time that Wild was hanged in 1725 – for the violation of an act against receivers which had been named after him – the profession of thief-taking had grown and prospered; and the Government, impressed by the numbers of robbers brought to justice by paid informers, added to the number of felonies which carried a reward.

The more complex the system became, however, the more corrupt it grew. Thief-takers having caught a deserter (the reward for which was one pound) or a horse thief (who was worth ten pounds) were reluctant to settle for so comparatively small a sum, when forty pounds could be earned for the conviction of a highwayman. So the thief-taker advised the man guilty of a lesser offence to choose a more profitable crime, and promising not to prosecute on the one charge would afterwards share the reward with a colleague on the other. Some thief-takers, indeed, enticed young men to commit a robbery on the highway, advised them how to do it, and provided horses and pistols and even opportunity. Then they arranged for their arrest and prosecution. Others did not trouble to act as *agents provocateurs*, relying on perjured evidence to obtain convictions.

Despite the obvious inadequacy of the reward system and the known occasions upon which innocent men had become its victims, it survived the eighteenth century. Huge sums were spent each year in thief-takers' rewards, while

the far smaller sums expended on other methods of repressing crime were criticized in Parliament as being both grossly extravagant and dangerously unconstitutional. By 1786 the total of rewards paid to private individuals had risen to over £10,000; the next year it was over £15,000; in 1815 it reached £18,000. Meanwhile the hangings at Tyburn went on with undiminished regularity.

The fact that a far more satisfactory method of crime prevention was being slowly and laboriously developed at the same time is due largely to two remarkable men, Henry Fielding and his blind half-brother John.

Henry Fielding came to Bow Street as a magistrate without any ideas of police reform in mind. His career as a dramatist had been ended by the Licensing Act which closed the Little Theatre, Haymarket, where his satirical comedies had been performed; his career as a novelist was not a profitable one; and he had not been a success as a barrister. He asked a friend with whom he had been at Eton to find him a job; and when he arrived at Bow Street his main intention was to make some money.

His predecessor there, Thomas de Veil, had made a great deal and was proud to have done so. A crude, vulgar and extravagant man with an immense appetite for women, which induced him to the end of his days, after having had four wives and twenty-five children, to keep a 'private closet for the examination of the fair sex', de Veil had been a great success at Bow Street. He had been determined to make a good living out of being a 'trading justice'; but his determined and courageous fight against London's big criminal gangs had earned him the gratitude of the Government, who rewarded him out of the Secret Service Fund and granted him a knighthood. By the time his career ended he could justifiably boast that he had been responsible for the execution or transportation of 'above nineteen hundred of the greatest malefactors that ever appeared in England'. He could also claim that Bow Street was the most important Magistrate's Court in England.

Henry Fielding was determined to keep it so. Less ruthless

and grasping than de Veil, he was quite as brave and far more imaginative. Immediately understanding that the prevention of crime was more important than the catching of criminals, he put his mind to work upon the means whereby that first essential aim might be accomplished. In 1751 he set forth his views in a remarkable tract.

His *Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* contains not only an impressive investigation into the causes of crime, but a severe indictment of many aspects of the administration of justice. Many of its findings seem negative and even repressive today, but at the time they created a profound impression. And much of what was best in them deeply influenced the reform movement of the future.

At Bow Street Fielding had the power to put his ideas into effect. His first task was to rid himself of the corrupt and inefficient constables and watchmen upon whose dubious services his predecessors had had to rely. These constables – most of them proxies serving on behalf of other citizens who could afford to evade their unwanted duties – had long since grown accustomed to supplementing their inadequate incomes by bribes and protection-money. Their colleagues, the watchmen, as Fielding rightly said in his novel *Amelia*, were 'chosen out of those poor old decrepit people who are, from their want of bodily strength, rendered incapable of getting a livelihood by work. These men, armed only with a pole, which some of them are scarcely able to lift, are to secure the persons and houses of his Majesty's subjects from the attacks of young, bold, stout desperate and well-armed villains.'

Of the eighty parish constables of Westminster, Fielding found that he could trust only six. But these six, well trained by the conscientious High Constable of Holborn, Saunders Welch, were so fired by Fielding's enthusiasm that they agreed to stay on at Bow Street when their year of office expired, though the only payment they could expect were the ordinary thief-takers' rewards. They became known as 'Mr Fielding's People' and were the prototype of the Bow Street Runners.

Month by month the efficiency and influence of 'Mr Fielding's People' grew, while Henry Fielding himself constantly reminded the public of their existence. He inserted regular announcements in the press, requesting that crimes should be reported to them, and frequently sent out notices, advertising the success of the Bow Street organization. Here, for example, is one which appeared in the *General Advertiser* for 5 February 1750, scarcely more than a year after his appointment: 'Near forty highwaymen, street robbers, burglars, rogues, vagabonds and cheats have been committed within a week by Justice Fielding.'

By this time Henry Fielding had been joined at Bow Street by the no less capable John, whose ears, it was (rather extravagantly) claimed, were so sharpened by his blindness that they could recognize three thousand thieves by their voices.

John helped Henry to prepare a plan, at the urgent request of the Duke of Newcastle, the minister in charge of home affairs, 'for putting an immediate end to those murders and robberies which were every day committed in the streets'.

For, despite all Henry's efforts, crime had been increasing at an alarming rate; and the Government were under constant attack for their inability to control it. Scarcely a day passed without some new audacious robbery being committed; and the letters and diaries of the period are full of such comments as this from one of Horace Walpole's letters of September 1750: 'I was sitting in my own dining-room on Sunday night, the clock had not struck eleven, when I heard a loud cry of "Stop thief!" A highwayman had attacked a post-chaise in Piccadilly, within fifty yards of this house; the fellow was pursued, rode over the watchman, almost killed him, and escaped. I expect to be robbed some night in my own garden at Strawberry.'

Henry Fielding, it was admitted, had done much. But far too many highway robberies were being committed still, and far too few highwaymen were being brought to justice. What, the Duke of Newcastle wanted to know, did Fielding propose to do about it?

Glad of the opportunity of putting their proposals into writing for the Government's consideration, Henry and his brother set to work and within four days had produced their plan. Much of what they proposed had already been put into effect at Bow Street without specific authority; and they felt sure that, granted sufficient funds, the plan was a practicable one.

They suggested that the Bow Street office should be open all day and night with a magistrate constantly in attendance; that there should always be two runners on duty, with horses for their exclusive use, ready to start out to any part of the country at fifteen minutes' notice; that these men should receive payment even if they did not succeed in securing a conviction, and that a fund should be established for buying information from informers and for rewarding helpful watchmen, ostlers and turnpike men. They also proposed that a register of all crimes reported and all suspected persons and convicted criminals should be kept by a responsible clerk; and that as much publicity as possible should be given to the Bow Street runners and to details of wanted men and stolen goods.

The plan would be expensive, the Fieldings admitted. It would cost £600 a year. But this was a very small sum compared with the great and increasing cost of the rewards system.

After a long delay the government approved the plan. But the cost of it alarmed them, and they would only pay £200 as an initial instalment.

Although so much less than what they had hoped for, the Fieldings began to put their plan into operation. Within a few days two dangerous gangs had been dispersed, and the famous highwayman Dennis Neal had been arrested. It was a hopeful beginning. And as the weeks passed and the government, albeit reluctantly, released further sums of money, the success of the new organization at Bow Street was maintained.

By the winter of 1753, the year of Henry Fielding's death, the incidence of crimes of violence had noticeably decreased. Criminals previously undeterred by the savageries of the

criminal code were now deterred by the growing likelihood of being caught. In 1754 John Fielding celebrated his first year in sole charge of the Bow Street office by the capture of the highwayman Charles Fleming, who had been pestering travellers on the roads out of London to the north for the past four years.

John knew, however, that far too many highwaymen were still escaping. He could publicly congratulate his men in the columns of the *Public Advertiser* for their spirit and bravery in ensuring that 'within a month this town has lately been freed from numbers of pickpockets, from no less than twenty pilfering shop-lifters, one gang of housebreakers, two very extraordinary horse-stealers, and two different gangs of street-robbers.' But the roads outside the town were still far from being freed from highwaymen. He called attention to a report of a single highwayman who had attacked two men, one of them a Guards captain, in a post-chaise on Hounslow Heath at two o'clock in the afternoon. As the highwayman had galloped off the captain had leaped out of the coach, released the horses from harness, mounted one of them, and given chase. He had galloped after him through Hounslow to Smallberry Green, but had lost him when his horse had become exhausted, and the highwayman had disappeared down a lane.

It seemed 'almost incredible', John Fielding complained, that 'notwithstanding the gentleman was not twenty yards from him in the town of Hounslow, and kept crying out "Highwayman! Highwayman!" as he pursued him, yet no one had spirit enough to join the pursuit'. It was as though 'all the inhabitants had been interested in the highwayman's escape'.

In an effort to instruct the public in ways that would help to drive the highwaymen from the roads, John Fielding published in 1755 a new *Plan for Preventing Robberies within Twenty Miles of London*. In this plan, Fielding reminded his readers that there was at Bow Street a squad of 'brave fellows' who held themselves ready at all times to pursue highwaymen. But these men could not do much to help unless the public gave them quick notice of any robberies committed. So he

proposed that people living on the outskirts of London should form themselves into clubs, paying subscriptions of two guineas a head, in order to provide for fast-riding messengers to be despatched to Bow Street immediately after a robbery with written information about the crime and, whenever possible, a description of the criminal. On his way into London the messenger was to pass on notice of the robbery to all the turnpike men, watchmen, postboys and innkeepers on his route; and at Bow Street he was to receive a certificate which would entitle him to payment from the club's money. It was a simple plan, 'a plain and trifling plan' Fielding himself called it, but as he pointed out 'it has often happened to my brother and myself that by bestowing a shilling or half a crown on a messenger, without which he would not have stirred one step, more service has been done to the public than has accrued from advertising rewards of a hundred pounds.'

Nevertheless, Patrick Pringle, the historian of these early days of the Bow Street police, has been unable to find out whether or not this simple plan was ever put into practice or whether or not any clubs were ever formed. Dr Leon Radzinowicz, in his monumental *History of English Criminal Law*, is more definite. The plan 'was not adopted,' he says, 'though from time to time districts were guarded by a horse patrol paid in part by private subscribers and directed and controlled by Fielding.'

Certainly, the Government were no more generous with John Fielding than they had been with Henry; and by the end of the year in which the *Plan* was published, John's police funds were exhausted.

Fielding even had difficulty in getting the Government to reimburse him for his expenses. He had frequently to remind the Home Office that money was due to him, and he had to account for every penny he spent. In 1756 his annual record of expenditure on his own men and outside informers for the previous year went into such detail as 'For an information of counterfeit half-pence, 2s. 6d.' 'For suppressing an illegal music meeting, 4s.' 'For dresses, tickets and other expenses

to proper persons for detecting and apprehending nine notorious gamblers at the Ridotto, 8l. 2s. 6d.' 'For dragging the ponds to find the clothes of Cannicot's Wife that was murdered, 2l. 2s.' 'For opening a pavement on suspicion of murder, 12s.'

Among the most expensive items were those which reflected the continuing fight against highwaymen: 'Waylaying a highwayman at a turnpike, 5s.' 'Pursuing a highwayman near Hackney, 17s. 6d.' 'Sitting up in an hospital with a highwayman that was wounded till fit to be examined, 1l. 11s. 6d.' 'Pursuing and apprehending Jonathan Wigmore, highwayman, for attempting to rob the King of Poland's groom, 8l. 8s.'

There are also records of occasional preventive patrols at 2s. 6d. a night for each man who took part in them: 'To John Spenceley, for 24 nights' patrol, 3l. 3s.' 'For patrolling the squares 19s. 6d.' 'Paid for two men and two horses patrolling the great roads to prevent robberies, and for patrolling the roads to Ranelagh during the season 9l. 16s. 10d.' 'To patrolling the roads near Claremont 1l. 18s. 6d.'

Each annual return of money spent shows how increasingly Fielding came to rely on these patrols, sending them out on specific searches for known offenders as well as on preventive duty when numbers of people would be returning home late at night after some entertainment. In the *Public Advertiser* for 24 May 1758, for instance, ladies attending a charity performance at Sadler's Wells were told that 'for their safety there will be a horse patrole armed that night on the New Road between Sadler's Wells and Grovenor Square'.

Useful as these patrols were, however, Fielding realized that they were far too infrequent to have any permanent effect on the numbers of highwaymen who, as the *Morning Chronicle* put it, 'continue to infest the roads to the indignation of the populace.' And in 1761 he submitted another far-reaching plan to the government.

In this plan, as well as suggesting that five or six salaried police-magistrates should be appointed to attend regularly at

a number of new police stations and to 'act upon one uniform plan', Fielding proposed a new remedy for 'the want of a proper force at the turnpikes' to pursue highwaymen. Since everyone who entered or left London had to go in or out of one of the turnpike gates, these were obvious places on which to centre a strong guard. Yet no strong guard had ever been provided.

What was needed, he said, was 'a regiment of Light Horse always quartered in the environs of London, who are to place centinels or pursuers at the several turnpikes adjacent to their several stations; in the day time to be one centinel at each turnpike and in the night two.' An officer or sergeant was to inspect the sentinels at regular hours. And shelters were to be built at the turnpikes for the men and horses in bad weather.

The Government, realizing the objections there would be to using troops for this kind of police work, rejected this part of the plan. They agreed, however, that Fielding should be provided with enough money – about £600 – to organize a civilian horse patrol which they felt would answer the same purpose.

At first eight men were employed. But as Fielding told the government, 'this number appeared on trial to be too few by two to cover the necessary ground which would make the whole complete. At present we shall be obliged to leave one avenue unguarded every night, but as this will be a secret to everyone but myself, it may not perhaps be attended with any ill consequences.'

Fielding's implied request for two more men was granted; and by the end of 1763 ten men – five of them with experience as constables, one a publican, one a former soldier, one a former sailor, one an ex-runner, and the tenth Fielding's coachman – were employed on the nightly patrol.

They were immediately successful – so successful, in fact, that during the first two weeks of their operations there were only two highway robberies, the criminals in both cases being caught. Indeed, they were altogether *too* successful. By the

spring of 1764, the roads leading out of London were safe even for the most unwary passengers; and Fielding suggested that the Horse Patrol should be made permanent.

The Government did not agree. It had been an extremely expensive innovation. The highwaymen had now been dispersed. So the Horse Patrol was no longer necessary.

Within a matter of weeks after the disbandment of the Horse Patrol through lack of any further money for its maintenance, the highwaymen returned. In the third week of June 1764 there were eight robberies within six days. Fielding did the best he could with his small force of runners; but without a permanent patrol he was fighting a losing battle.

He repeatedly appealed to the Government to allow him to bring back his Horse Patrol; and since the number of robberies had by now almost reached their previous height, he was at length granted sufficient funds to reassemble the men and to keep them in operation until October. But then, alarmed once more by its (quite modest) cost, and satisfied that the highwaymen had again been dispersed, the Government refused to sanction the patrol's further activities.

It was disbanded for the second time; and for the second time the highwaymen came back. By the 1770's the roads were as dangerous as they had ever been. The Prime Minister was robbed; so were the Prince of Wales and his brother, the Duke of York; a former solicitor to the Treasury was fired upon in his coach; the Lord Mayor was held up near Turnham Green and robbed 'in sight of all his retinue'; two daughters of Admiral Holborn were robbed in St James's Square, and the Neapolitan Ambassador in Grosvenor Square; one of the Northern Stages was repeatedly stopped near Highgate by a highwayman who did not scruple to fire into the coach. Travellers returning to London late at night took to waiting until a sufficient number of them had collected to deter even the most intrepid highwayman. In Kensington a bell was rung at intervals throughout the night so that people who had visited the outlying villages during the day could go back together. In Islington, the Angel was a well-known gathering

place for prudent travellers who had the foresight not to attempt the perilous journey into London on their own. But the outrages still continued.

It was not until 1805, when the number and violence of the depredations persuaded the Government that its restoration was essential, that the Horse Patrol came back into being. This time it was not disbanded, and by the time of its re-organization in 1821, the highwayman was already becoming a part of history.

# 5

# Dreadful Mementoes

'On Tuesday morning William Peare was executed at Fisherton gallows for robbing the mail near Chippenham. The remaining part of the sentence was completed on Wednesday, by hanging the body in chains in Green Lane, near Chippenham, where it now is: as a dreadful memento to youth, how they swerve from the paths of rectitude, and transgress the laws of their country.'

*The Salisbury Journal, 25 August 1783*

'It will scarcely be credited,' wrote a magistrate in 1776, 'that by the laws of England there are above one hundred and sixty different offences which subject the parties who are guilty to the punishment of death.' The number was constantly growing until, by the beginning of the following century, there was 'probably no other country in the world', so it was suggested in a Parliamentary debate in 1810, 'in which so many and so great a variety of human actions' were 'punishable with loss of life as in England'.

Since a thirteen-year-old boy could be hanged – and one boy of this age was hanged in 1801 – for stealing a spoon; and since a fourteen-year-old girl could be hanged for being found in the company of gypsies – and one girl, together with several other people, was hanged for this crime in 1782 – few people complained that robbery on the highway was a capital offence.

Of course, the number of highwaymen charged bore no relation to the number executed. There was what the legal historian Sir Frank Mackinnon was later to call a 'general conspiracy of benevolence' on the part of the courts to

mitigate the effects of the savage penal system 'by excessive technicalities of procedure'.

It was not unknown, for instance, for a particularly appealing highwayman to be acquitted because of some trifling inaccuracy in the indictment, such as the mis-spelling of his name. Nor was it unknown for a capital charge to be quashed when a jury committed what Blackstone termed 'pious perjury'. The system was also mitigated, for those highwaymen who could afford it, by wholesale bribery.

A convicted highwayman could not expect to escape with a term of imprisonment. For prisons then were places where people were held while awaiting trial or physical punishment, and where debtors – who formed most of the prison population in the eighteenth century – were confined until their creditors were satisfied. But a rich or fortunate highwayman, or one who had taken care not to aggravate his offence in the eyes of the court by murdering his victim, might escape with transportation, a form of punishment given some sort of legal basis by a clause in the Elizabethan Vagrancy Act, and incorporated into the penal system by an act of 1717 which initiated the systematic transportation of criminals to the American colonies.

Nevertheless, hangings were still common enough even towards the end of the eighteenth century, by which time the worst severity in the application of capital statues had passed. There were ninety-seven executions in London and Middlesex alone in 1785, ninety-two in 1787, and still an average of about one a fortnight in 1799. A veteran Bow Street runner giving evidence before a Parliamentary Committee said that in the 1780's he had twice seen forty men hanged in a single day.

A high proportion of these were highwaymen. Between 1749 and 1771 over two hundred and fifty highwaymen were hanged at Tyburn alone.

A frequent additional punishment was the gibbeting of the highwayman's corpse in an iron cage near the scene of his crime. Although not legalized until 1752 the hanging in

chains of executed criminals had been frequently practised for at least four hundred years, and remained a common practice until 1834.

Throughout the age of the highwayman, decomposing corpses hanging in chains by the roadside were to be seen all over England, while gibbets were well-known landmarks. Ogilby's guide, *Itinirarium Angliae*, is full of such directions as 'ascend a small hill with a gibbet on the right', 'leave Frampton by a gibbet on the left', or 'pass Pin-men's Hall with a gibbet on the right.'

Highwaymen were hanged in chains most frequently for the crime of robbing the mails. The *Salisbury Journal* for 18 August 1783 contains a characteristic entry:

'The sentence of William Peare for robbing the mail near Chippenham stands unreserved. [This means that he had not been pardoned and sentenced to transportation] . . . He will be executed at Fisherton gallows, on Tuesday morning, about 11 o'clock, and his body will then be enclosed in a suit of chains, ingeniously made by Mr Wansborough and conveyed to Chippenham, and affixed to a gibbet erected near the spot where the robbery was committed . . . as a dreadful memento to youth, how they swerve from the paths of rectitude, and transgress the laws of their country.'

So that these dreadful mementoes could be seen by as many youths as possible, the gibbets were erected in the most conspicuous spot in the immediate neighbourhood. When William Lewin was hanged at Chester in 1791 for robbing a post-boy carrying letters from Warrington to Northwich, his body was gibbeted at the top of Helsby Tor from which it could be seen not only in Cheshire but also in Lancashire, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Shropshire and Derbyshire.

Despite this grisly warning, five months after it had been erected, a highwayman, Edward Miles, rode past it to rob a post-boy carrying the mail to Manchester. He, too, was hanged and gibbeted, and served as no more effective a deterrent than his predecessor.

Sometimes, according to local traditions, highwaymen were gibbeted alive. This happened, so historians of the locality would have us believe, at Wetherell near Carlisle, where the notorious north-country highwayman John Whitfield hung for several days in agony until a mail-coachman, taking pity on him, went up to him and shot him in his cage.

John Whitfield, who had committed murder as well as highway robbery, evidently had no reliable friends. For few well-known highwaymen, even when they were dead, were allowed to remain on their gibbets for long. It was an offence to remove a corpse from a gibbet; but neither this nor the measures taken to secure the body to its chains and to encase the gibbet pole in iron to prevent it being cut down, prevented the highwayman's friends taking his remains away and burying them out of reach of birds and flies and rats.

To preserve the body for as long as possible as a deterrent, hangmen or prison staff were usually ordered to saturate it in tar. But this merely made it easier for the victim's friends to destroy the corpse by fire. As, for instance, in the case of the tarred corpses of three highwaymen which were hanged in chains at the top of the Chevin, near Belper, in Derbyshire as a memento of the robbing of the North Coach while it was changing horses at the inn at Hazelwood. One dark night a friend of the highwayman climbed the Chevin and set all the bodies alight. So fiercely did they burn that the next morning only the links of the iron cage remained on the site of the gibbet.

The last man to be hanged in chains in England was James Cook, who was suspended on a gibbet thirty-three feet high at Aylestone near Leicester. The body was taken down and buried, however, when it became a meeting-place for noisy crowds on Sunday afternoons and an object of morbid pleasure to the necrophiliac.

Soon afterwards it was at last accepted that gibbeting was not having – nor ever had had – any effect on the numbers of highway robberies that were committed. Many of them had

taken place, in fact, beneath the very gibbets which had been erected to prevent them.

But if the hanging of dead bodies had not proved a satisfactory deterrent, men continued to rest their hopes in the hanging of live ones.

# 6

# The Hanging Match

'His waistcoat and stockings and breeches were white;
His cap had a new cherry ribbon to tie't.
The maids to the doors and balconies ran.
And said, "Lack-a-day, he's a proper young man!" '

*Jonathan Swift, 1727*

It was soon after Dick Turpin's death on the gallows at York that Henry Fielding published his *Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers.* In this inquiry Fielding strongly condemned the public's reverential attitude towards such criminals during their last hours.

'The day appointed by law for the thief's shame,' he wrote, 'is the day of glory in his own opinion. His procession to Tyburn and his last moments there are all triumphant; attended with the compassion of the weak and tender-hearted, and with the applause, admiration and envy of all the bold and hardened. His behaviour in his present condition, not the crimes, how atrocious soever, which brought him to it, is the subject of contemplation. And if he hath sense enough to temper his boldness with any degree of decency, his death is spoken of by many with honour, by most with pity, and by all with approbation.'

At the time Fielding wrote, the manner in which a highwayman was expected to meet his death had long been established by custom. There were those, of course, who, when the time came, did not have the courage to follow the traditional procedures.

One such was Paul Lewis, the Sussex parson's son who had

been an artillery officer. In Newgate, while awaiting execution, he behaved outrageously enough, sitting at the head of the table in the Condemned Hold, drinking and gambling, singing obscene songs, and damning the chaplain whom he threatened to take to hell with him.

When his old father came to see him for the last time and put twelve guineas into his hand, Lewis slipped one of the pieces of gold into his pocket and told him that there were only eleven. His father thereupon gave him another and after the old man had gone, Lewis turned exultingly round to his fellow prisoners and said, 'I have flung the old fellow out of another guinea.'

As the day of his hanging drew near, he boasted that no hangman would ever put a halter round *his* neck, that he would save him the trouble and take his own life like a man of honour. He hid a knife in his pillow for this purpose; but, unable to bring himself to use it, he dropped it one day in chapel as if by accident and it was taken from him.

When the warrant for his execution arrived, Lewis's front of bravura suddenly collapsed, he 'lost all his assumed courage, his vauntings sank into trembling fears, and he became as abject as before he appeared hardened.'

There were highwaymen, too, for whom the strain of waiting for their 'day of glory' proved too great. One of these was John Ashton, whose mind gave way while awaiting execution in Newgate in 1814. Led to the gallows in front of Newgate, Ashton ran up the steps as fast as he could and having reached the top of the platform began to kick and dance, and to shout to the crowds below, 'Look at me! I am Lord Wellington!'

A contemporary account of this pathetic scene records that 'the Rev Mr Cotton, who officiated for the first time as Ordinary [chaplain], enjoined him to prayer, to which he paid little attention, and continued to clap his hands as far as he was permitted by the extent of the cord. All that could be done was ineffectual, and it was necessary to have two men to hold him during the awful ceremony. When they released him

for the purpose of the Lord's Prayer being said, he turned round, and began to dance, and vociferated again, "Look at me; I am Lord Wellington!" At twenty minutes past eight o'clock, the signal was given, and the platform fell. Scarcely, however, had the sufferers dropped, before, to the awe and astonishment of every beholder, Ashton rebounded from the rope, and was instantaneously seen dancing near the Ordinary, and crying out very loudly, and apparently unhurt, "What do ye think of me? Am I not Lord Wellington now?" He then danced, clapped his hands, and huzzaed. At length the executioner was compelled to get upon the scaffold, and to push him forcibly from the place on which he stood.'

While few highwaymen displayed such obvious symptoms of insanity at the time of their execution as John Ashton, there were many whose carefree insouciance seemed scarcely normal. Tom Austin, for example, the son of an honest Devon farmer, whose crimes included the murders of his aunt and five cousins as well as of his wife and his own two children, caught sight of a woman selling curds and whey beside the gallows at Exeter. 'There's a woman I see yonder with some curds and whey,' he said with sudden relish. 'Now, I wish I could have a pennyworth of them before I am hanged, because I know not when I shall eat any again.'

Isaac Atkinson, the son of a gentleman from Farringdon, a young man who had been educated at Oxford and had subsequently made a handsome living by following the circuits in order to rob the judges, stabbed the chaplain with a penknife on the way to the gallows. Just as he was being turned off, he called out to the spectators, smiling cheerfully, 'There's nothing like a merry life and a short one!'

Both the assault on the chaplain and the final shout of defiance were much admired by the spectators of a hanging, and were, indeed, expected of the highwayman who sought to end his life as a highwayman should.

Lieutenant Edward Bird, the son of a wealthy shopkeeper who had wanted to make a gentleman of his son by buying him a commission, made a great play of ignoring all that the

chaplain said to him on the way to the gallows and of interrupting his sermon with demands for wine and snuff. In the same way Sawney Douglas, a cheerfully impudent Scottish soldier, protested to the crowd in the middle of the chaplain's exhortations that England was the strangest country he had ever been in, for a man couldn't even go to the gallows there in peace. 'The Devil may blow my bladder full of pebble-stones,' he exclaimed in exasperation, 'if this mon may not as well sing psalms to a dead horse as prate thus to me . . . I swear if I am damned it's because I was hanged after this superstitious way.'

Huffey White, who was hanged for robbing the Leeds Mail in 1813, showed a no less hardy indifference to the comfort offered by the chaplain. Disdaining to attend to his unctious consolations, he answered a final question as to whether or not there was anything at all that would be of comfort to him by replying that all he wanted was some other man to be hanged in his place.

All highwaymen worthy of their salt were expected to spend their last few days in prison enjoying themselves and spending what remained of their money, as M'Lean, Duval, Turpin and 'Sixteen-String Jack' had done.

Tom Rowland, for instance, appalled a prison chaplain by choosing to spend his last hours in the arms of a common whore and 'by glorying in the same unparalleled audaciousness as he was going to execution'. But in fact there was nothing unparalleled about such behaviour. When Dick Hughes, a Welsh farmer's son, protested in Newgate that 'could he have but one whore before he died, he should die with great satisfaction', he was making a common enough request.

Hughes's wife, clearly a dutiful and conscientious woman, had visited her husband often in prison; and as he was being taken to Tyburn on Midsummer's Day 1709, she is said to have called up to him nervously, 'My dear, who must find the rope that's to hang you, me or the sheriff?'

'The sheriff, honey,' her husband called back. 'For who's obliged to find him tools to do his work?'

'Ah! I wish I had known so much before, 'twould have saved me twopence, for I have been and bought one already.'

'Well, well, perhaps it mayn't be lost, for it may serve a second husband.'

Hughes was still smiling at his joke, those who watched him said, when the hangman put the noose round his neck.

Such assumed unconcern, such hardy indifference to death and to pleas for repentance were certainly a delight to the spectators. And Henry Fielding was not alone in condemning this reaction to the highwayman's traditional approach to his punishment as prejudicial to the whole theory of deterrence.

Jonathan Swift had already made a similar criticism in his own individual way in *Clever Tom Clinch, Going to be Hanged*:

'As clever Tom Clinch, while the rabble was bawling,
Rode stately through Holborn to die in his calling,
He stopt at the George for a bottle of sack,
And promised to pay for it when he came back.
His waistcoat and stockings and breeches were white;
His cap had a new cherry ribbon to tie't.
The maids to the doors and balconies ran,
And said, "Lack-a-day, he's a proper young man!"
But, as from the windows the ladies he spied,
Like a bow in the box, he bow'd low on each side!
And when his last speech the loud hawkers did cry
He swore from his cart "It was all a damn'd lie!"
The hangman for pardon fell down on his knee;
Tom gave him a kick in the guts for his fee:
Then said, "I must speak to the people a little;
But I'll see you all damn'd before I will wittle . . .
Take courage, dear comrades, and be not afraid,
Nor slip this occasion to follow your trade;
My conscience is clear, and my spirits are calm,
And thus I go off without prayer-book or psalm;
Then follow the practice of Clever Tom Clinch
Who hung like a hero who never would flinch." '

Several years after these verses were written, a Scottish clergyman confirmed how true they were. 'Among the immense multitude of spectators,' he wrote of the scene of a Tyburn hanging, 'some at windows, some upon carts, thousands standing and jostling one another in the surrounding fields – my conviction is that, in a moral view, a great number were made worse instead of better, by the awful spectacle. Of the ragamuffin class a large proportion were gratified by the sight; and within my hearing many expressed their admiration of the fortitude, as they termed the hardness and stupidity, of one of the sufferers.'

A hanging day was a public holiday for the labouring classes; but it was not only they who were drawn to Tyburn Fair. As can be seen in Hogarth's celebrated engraving, the more well-to-do were able to buy a good seat from which to watch the spectacle, in the grandstand known as Mother Proctor's Pews, after the farmer's widow who made a fortune out of her grisly enterprise.

Horace Walpole's witty friend George Selwyn, who never missed a hanging if he could help it, was a regular customer of Mother Proctor, and was prepared to make long and uncomfortable journeys to satisfy his taste. 'The most frightful particulars relating to suicide and murder,' his biographer wrote of him, 'the investigation of a disfigured corpse; the sight of an acquaintance lying in his shroud seem to have afforded him a painful and unaccountable pleasure. When the first Lord Holland was on his death-bed, he was told that Selwyn had called to inquire after his health. "The next time Mr Selwyn calls," he said, "show him up: if I am alive I shall be delighted to see him and if I am dead he will be glad to see me." '

George Selwyn's tastes were by no means exceptional. *The Daily Journal* reported that hundreds of ladies and gentlemen were present at M'Lean's execution; a Duke took a party of twenty-two friends and relations to a hanging the following year; and when Duval was hanged scores of ladies in masks came to throw flowers at the feet of their handsome hero.

Even after they were dead the bodies of such heroes were

revered. Here is a contemporary account of what happened to Dick Turpin's corpse.

'The Grave was dug very deep, and the Persons whom he had appointed his Mourners . . . took all possible care to secure the Body; notwithstanding which, on *Tuesday* Morning, about three o'Clock, some Persons were discover'd to be moving off the Body, which they had taken up; and the Mob having got Scent where it was carried to, and suspecting it was to be anatomized, went to a Garden in which it was deposited, and brought away the Body through the streets of the City, in a sort of Triumph, almost naked, being only laid on a Board, cover'd with some Straw, and carried on four Men's Shoulders.'

As well as being paraded through the streets in triumph, criminals' corpses were valued for superstitious reasons. As they were cut down from the gallows the spectators would surge forward to touch them, taking their children with them; for it was believed that the 'death sweat' of an executed corpse possessed some magical spirit, some medicinal qualities which were present in the remains of all dead criminals but were especially strong in the bodies of highwaymen. Women would lift up a dead highwayman's hand to brush it against their cheek, or against the faces of their children. And a French visitor once saw 'a young woman, with an appearance of beauty, all pale and trembling in the arms of the executioner, who submitted to have her bosom uncovered in the presence of thousands of spectators and the dead man's hand placed upon it'.

Such sights were painfully repellent, a correspondent complained in *Parker's London News*, but what else could one expect when the criminal was made out to be a martyr and a hero, and the honest man a blockhead and a dupe?

# 7

# The Newgate Pastoral

'Tales of their cunning and generosity were in the mouths of everybody, and a noted thief was a kind of hero.'

*Abbé le Blanc, c. 1737*

'You cannot conceive the ridiculous rage there is of going to Newgate,' Walpole told Horace Mann in the summer of 1750, 'the prints that are published of the malefactors, and the memoirs of their lives set forth with as much parade as Marshal Turenne's.'

Walpole himself, so he said, was 'almost single in not having been to see' the highwayman M'Lean in Newgate. Lord Mountford 'at the head of half White's ' went the first day; Lord Mountford's aunt went, and burst into tears; so did Lady Caroline Petersham and Miss Ashe.

The custom of visiting famous criminals in the Condemned Hold had been long established.

'Nothing contributes so much to the entertainment of the town at present,' a London journalist wrote in November 1724 of the adventures of the celebrated Jack Sheppard. ' 'Tis thought the Keeper of Newgate have got 200l. already by the crowds of people who flock daily to see [him].' Country people, too, had come up to London specially to see one or other of the 'three great Curiosities as this town at present affords viz: The two young Lyons stuff'd at the Tower; the ostrich on Ludgate-Hill; and the famous John Sheppard in Newgate.'

Apart from his marvellous dexterity as a prison-breaker – at which, in the words of V. S. Pritchett, he did admittedly

'show a flash of cold genius' – Jack Sheppard was a peculiarly unsuccessful criminal. Although often described as 'the famous highwayman', it was not on highway robbery that his fame depended.

He seems, indeed, to have been one only for a week or so, during which he collected no more than thirty shillings and sixpence. Half a crown of this sum was taken from a lady's maid on the Hampstead road, six shillings from a drunken grocer as he staggered out of 'The Half Way House' in Hampstead Village, and twenty-two shillings from a stage coach.

Unremarkable as he was as a highwayman, however, having dramatically escaped once from St Giles's Roundhouse, once from the New Prison Clerkenwell and twice from the Condemned Hold in Newgate, this pale, slight, boyish-looking thief, with his immense brown eyes, ready wit and attractive stammer, had become the most talked of celebrity in England.

His adventures filled column after column in the newspapers, in pamphlets, broadsheets and chap-books, and in numerous 'authentic confessions'; he was the subject of countless ballads and countless prints; his portrait was painted – it was said, at the suggestion of King George himself – by Sir James Thornhill, the most fashionable artist of his time. Thornhill's son-in-law, William Hogarth, was inspired by Sheppard's career to paint the series of pictures, 'Industry and Idleness'. Sheppard himself gave an account of his life and adventures to Daniel Defoe, whose subsequent version of his history was one of at least ten published within a few months of his death.

Despite the appalling stench and squalor of the Condemned Hold, where the foul air made them sick unless they squeezed a vinegar-soaked handkerchief to their nostrils, hundreds upon hundreds of visitors continued throughout the autumn of 1724 to pay three shillings and sixpence each to come to stare at Sheppard as he sat manacled and chained to the floor.

During the week before he was hanged almost half the front page of *The Daily Journal* was devoted to his 'last epistle'; the whole of one of the six pages of *Parker's London*

*News* was given up to the latest report about him; another paper reported that 'nothing more at present is talked on about Town, than Jack Sheppard'; and the King was reported to have sent a special request for the 'two prints of Sheppard showing the manner of him being chained to the floor in the Castle at Newgate'.

On the day of his hanging an eyewitness estimated that 200,000 people came out into the streets to jostle for a place along the processional route between Newgate and Tyburn or around the gallows. As Sheppard's body was cut down, men in the crowd fought each other for its possession, determined that it should not fall into the hands of the surgeons, hoping that they might yet bring it back to life. And later on that night there was a riot outside 'The Barley Mow', where the bruised corpse had at length been taken by a gang of the hero's admirers.

'A great many Justices met to concert proper Measures to Conserve the Peace. The proclamation against Riots was read several times to disperse them; the Magistrates seeming loth to proceed to Extremities with the Giddy Rabble.' The reading of the Riot Act had no effect on the mob, however, and a message had to be sent for a company of Foot Guards from the Savoy.

A fortnight after his execution the first of the scores of dramatizations of the Jack Sheppard story was performed at Drury Lane. And for the rest of the century, and well on into the next, highly idealized accounts of the 'famous highwayman's' adventure were presented, generation after generation, to an apparently insatiable public. In 1839 William Harrison Ainsworth, after Dickens the most popular and successful of early Victorian novelists, began to publish his new criminal romance, *Jack Sheppard*, in serial parts. The enormous popularity of this novel exceeded even the most hopeful expectations of his publishers, accustomed as they were to the public's taste for such stories. Following Ainsworth's success, numerous pirating journalists and hack writers brought out lurid imitations of his melodramatic

story, while no less than nine new plays, based on the hero's by now almost mythical adventures, appeared in that one year of 1840 alone.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Jack Sheppard continued to excite the imagination of Victorian audiences and readers, print-collectors and song-writers, and of nurseries full of children, who manipulated his cardboard limbs on the stages of puppet theatres, bringing tears to the eyes of their parents as together they mourned the tragedy of his untimely death.

One of the leading characters in these various representations of the Jack Sheppard legend was Joseph Blake, known as Blueskin, Sheppard's whoring companion and accomplice. Blake was a drunken, savage-looking ruffian who achieved nation-wide notoriety by attempting to cut off Jonathan Wild's head in the courtyard of the Old Bailey Sessions House.

Wild, called upon to give evidence at the trial of Blake, had gone up to him in the courtyard, and, hoping to get some information which he could turn to his profit, had offered him a drink from his flask. Blake, encouraged by Wild's apparent friendliness, had asked him to say a good word for him at his trial. Wild laughed in his face, and said, 'I can't do that. You're a dead man and will be tucked up very speedily.'

At these words Blake flew at Wild and cut his throat to the windpipe. Had not the penknife been so blunt and Wild's plaited muslin stock so thick, and had not two surgeons been standing by, Blake might well have succeeded in killing Wild and throwing his head down 'amongst the rabble' in the Sessions House yard, as he claimed had been his intention.

This incident delighted the ballad writers, and provided one of the most gifted of their numbers, John Gay, with the subject for his

'NEWGATE'S GARLAND
being
A NEW BALLAD
showing
How Mr Jonathan Wild's throat was cut from

Ear to Ear with a penknife, by Mr Blake,
alias *Blueskin*, the bold highwayman, as he
stood at his tryal in the
*Old Bailey*, *1724*.
To the tune of *The Cut-purse*.'

This ballad begins:

'Ye Gallants of Newgate, whose Fingers are nice
In diving in pockets, or cogging of Dice.
Ye Sharpers so rich, who can buy off the Noose
Ye honester poor Rogues, who die in your shoes
Attend and draw near
Good news ye shall hear
How *Jonathan's* throat was cut from Ear to Ear.
Now *Blueskin's* sharp knife hath set you at Ease
And every Man round me may rob as he please.'

Using the criminal adventure of highwaymen to draw parallels with the underhand activities of the hypocritical ruling class and the Government and its agencies, Gay satirically continues:

'Some say there are Courtiers of highest renown
Who steal the King's *Gold*, and leave him but a *Crown*;
Some say there are Peers, and some Parliament Men,
Who meet once a year to rob Courtiers agen;
Let them all take their swing
To pillage the King,
And get a Blue Ribbon instead of a String . . .
Some cheat in the Customs, some rob the Excise,
But he who robs both is esteemed most wise.
Church-wardens, too prudent to hazard the Halter,
As yet only venture to steal from the Alter.
But now to get Gold
They may be more Bold
And rob on the highway since *Jonathan's* cold.'

It was Jonathan Swift who, some years before, had suggested to Gay the idea of a 'Newgate Pastoral'. Gay had been

responsive and had already tried his hand at an earlier version of *Newgate's Garland* in a ballad called *Blueskin's Ballad* written the year before, when Blake was still at liberty and was being credited by the newspapers with a good deal more talent as a highwayman than in fact he possessed.

But it was with *The Beggar's Opera* that Swift's idea was fully and brilliantly realized.

Those who read the opera before its first production were very doubtful that it would be well received. 'John Gay's Opera is on the point of delivery,' Pope told Swift in January 1728. 'It may be called, considering its subject, a Jail delivery. Mr Congreve, with whom I have commemorated you, is anxious as to its success, and so am I. Whether it succeeds or not, it will make a great noise, but whether of claps or hisses I know not.' The Duke of Queensberry was of the same opinion, which he expressed to the author bluntly, 'This is a very odd thing, Gay. I am satisfied that it is either a very good thing or a very bad thing.'

Although Colley Cibber refused to accept it for Drury Lane, Aaron Hill declined it for the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, and Rich accepted it for the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre with reluctance, it proved in the event to be a very good thing indeed.

On the opening night, according to *The Daily Journal*, 'there was present a prodigious Concourse of Nobility and Gentry, and no theatrical performance for these many years has met with so much Applause.'

Its success was no mere flash in the pan. It was the most successful theatrical production of the eighteenth century and inspired a deluge of inferior imitations, from the *Cobler's Opera* to the *Beggar's Wedding*, from the *Prison-Breaker* to *Macheath in the Shades*. Repeatedly revived, *The Beggar's Opera* never failed to repeat its early triumph, although the edge of its satire became, of course, increasingly blunted.

In the 1720's the satirical content of the opera was strong and obvious. Superficially the story of a gallant bravado of a highwayman, Captain Macheath, and his improbably angelic

little sweetheart, Polly Peachum, it was at the same time, as *The Craftsman* said, 'the most venomous *allegorical libel* against the [Government] that hath appeared for many years.' And the unmistakable parallels between the corruption of the Government and the corruption of the world of the highwayman were not drawn in favour of Robert Walpole's administration. This, however, aroused more resentment amongst the ministers of the Church than those of the Crown. Sermons were preached and tracts were published protesting against the idealization of the criminal, against the illusions that *The Beggar's Opera* 'could not fail to create in the minds of the public', and against the presentation of a wicked, sordid world which was held up for its contemplation and approbation.

Such criticisms increased – as such criticisms always do – the popularity of the work. While the moralists condemned it, the people flocked in growing numbers to see it. The actor Thomas Walker, who made his reputation by portraying Macheath, became the darling of society, and was 'eagerly sought out,' according to one disapproving critic, 'by all the dissipated young gentlemen of the day, among whom he acquired habits of intemperance by no means favourable to the performances of his professional duties.'

Behind the narrow, puritanical strictures of the moralists there was, nevertheless, a sensible argument. This argument was much discussed at the time. Here is Boswell's record of a conversation he had on the subject with Dr Johnson:

'*The Beggar's Opera*, and the common question, whether it was pernicious in its effects, having been introduced; – JOHNSON, "As to this matter, which has been very much contested, I myself am of opinion, that more influence has been ascribed to *The Beggar's Opera* than it in reality ever had; for I do not believe that any man was ever made a rogue by being present at its representation. At the same time I do not deny that it may have some influence, by making the character of a rogue familiar, and in some degree pleasing." Then collecting himself, as it were, to give a heavy stroke: "There is in it such a *labefaction* of all principle as may be injurious to morality."

'While he pronounced this response, we sat in a comical sort of restraint, smothering a laugh, which we were afraid might burst out. In his life of Gay, he has been still more decisive as to the inefficiency of *The Beggar's Opera* in corrupting society. But I have ever thought somewhat differently; for, indeed, not only are the gaiety and heroism of a highwayman very captivating to a youthful imagination, but the arguments for adventurous depredation are so plausible, the allusions so lively, and the contrasts with the ordinary and more painful modes of acquiring the property are so artfully displayed, that it requires a cool and strong judgement to resist so imposing an aggregate: Yet I own, I should be very sorry to have *The Beggar's Opera* suppressed; for there is in it much of real London Life, so much brilliant wit, and such a variety of airs, which, from early association of ideas, engage, soothe, and enliven the mind, that no performance which the theatre exhibits, delights me more.'

There were, however, those who thought that, delightful as it was, *The Beggar's Opera* should be suppressed. Boswell quoted the opinion of a 'very eminent physician, whose discernment [was] as acute and penetrating in judging of the human character as in his own profession.' This physician once remarked at a club where Boswell was that 'a lively young man, fond of pleasure, and without money, would hardly resist a solicitation from his mistress to go upon the highway, immediately after being present at the representation of *The Beggar's Opera*.'

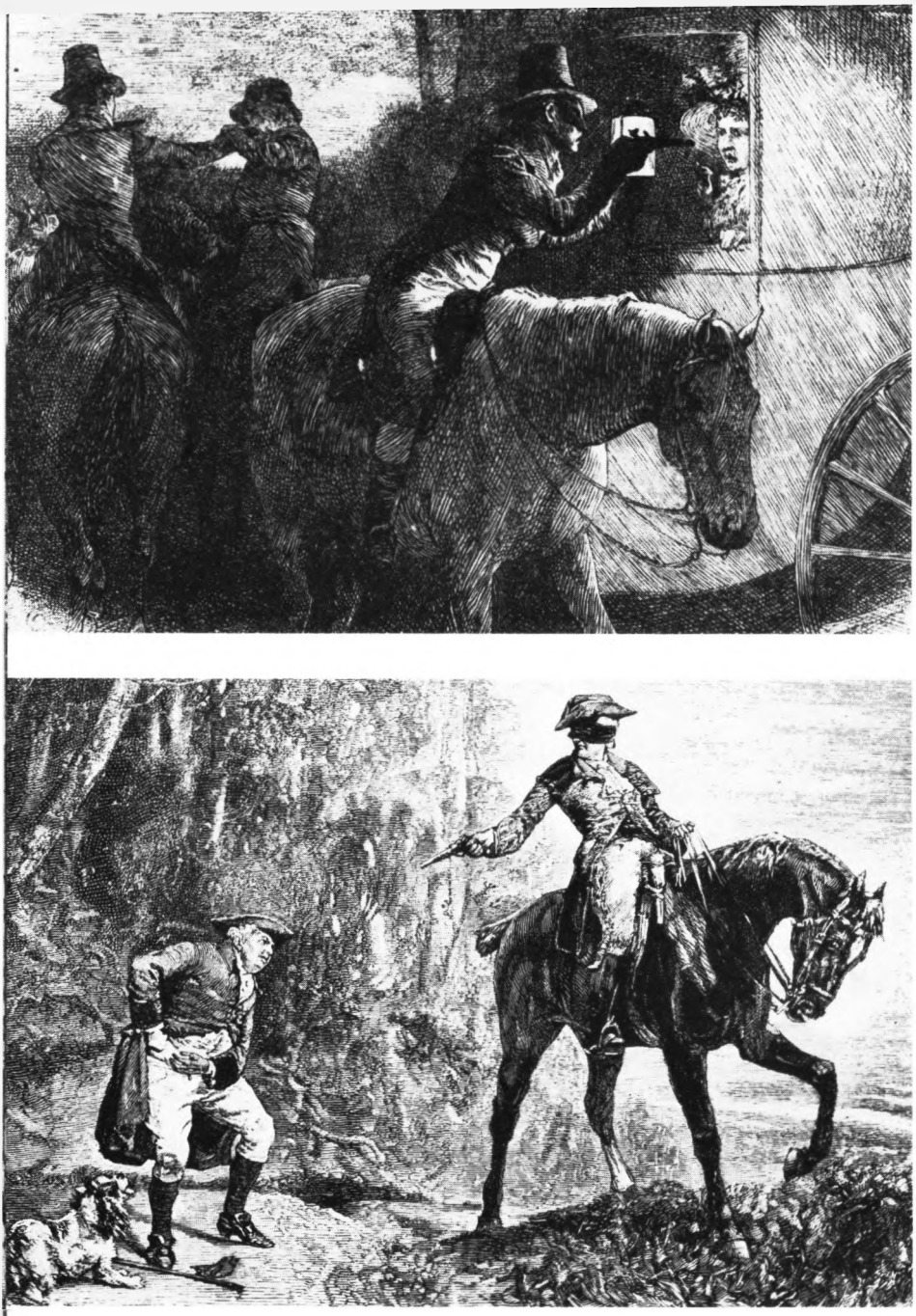
There were, in fact, well-authenticated examples of impressionable young men being influenced by the opera. Two of these examples are given by Ireland and Nichols in *Hogarth's Works*. Two boys, both less than nineteen years old and both the sons of 'worthy and respectable parents', fled from their homes, these writers say, and took to a life of crime. When at last arrested they were both found to be carrying copies of *The Beggar's Opera* in their pockets. The second example was of a boy of seventeen, who on being tried at the Old Bailey for his first offence, 'acknowledged himself so delighted with the

Jack Sheppard in the Stone Room in Newgate

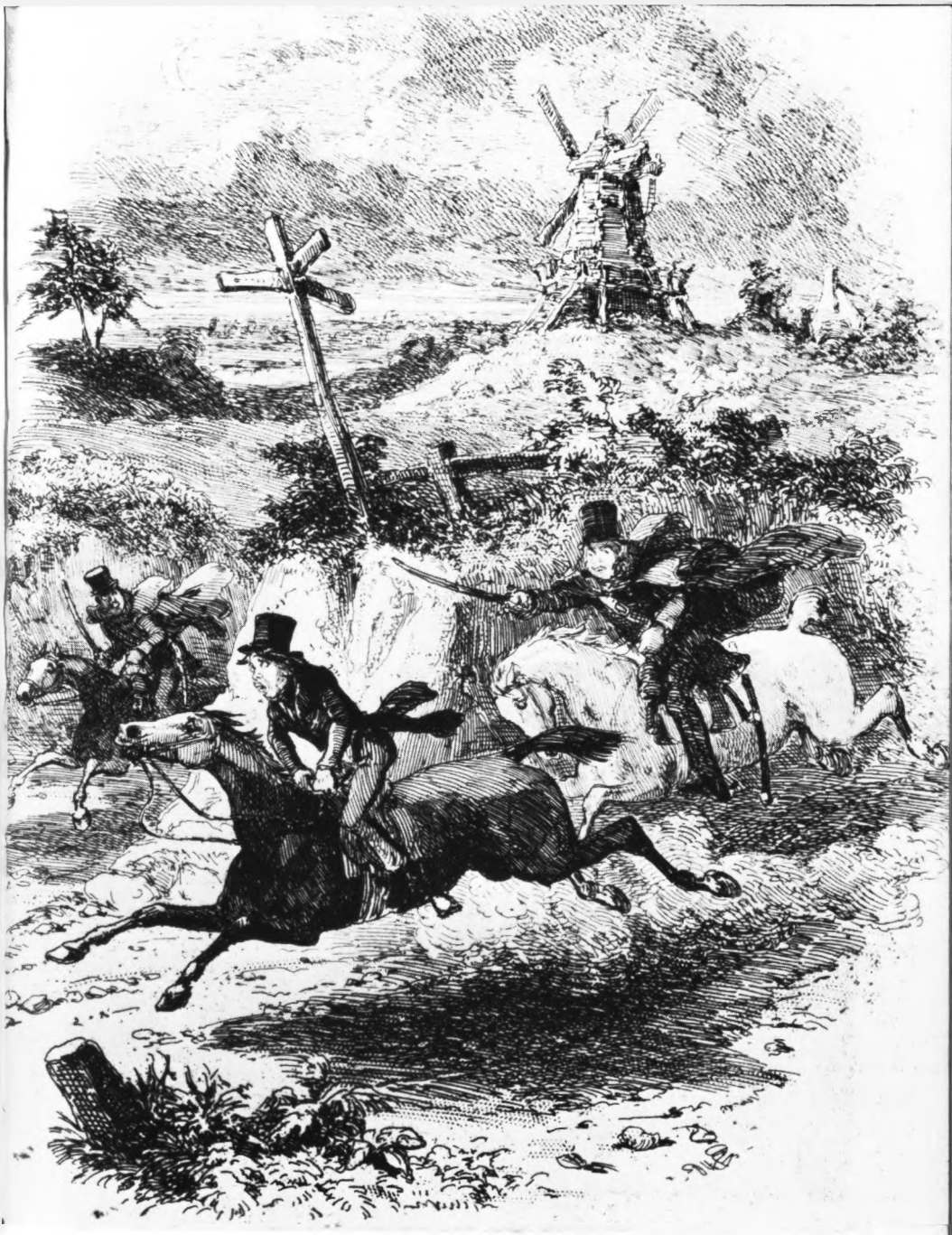
The escapades of famous highwaymen were a popular subject with Victorian narrative painters – 'The King's Highway' by D. Dodd

*opposite above* Hawkins and Simpson robbing the mail near Colnbrook; *opposite below* Thomas Waters robbing a band of gypsies. Prints such as these were sold by the thousand in the streets of eighteenth-century London

Another Victorian narrative picture, depicting Claude Duval dancing a coranto with one of his victims on Hounslow Heath



The highwayman, in stories both romantic and comic, was a recurrent character in Victorian popular fiction



Old Mob (Thomas Sympson) robs the Duchess of Portsmouth. The reputation which highwaymen had of being extremely polite to ladies of quality has inspired numerous fanciful stories and pictures such as this from Charles Harper's *Half-Hours with the Highwaymen* (1908)

spirit and heroic character of Macheath, that on quitting the theatre he laid out his last guinea on the purchase of a pair of pistols, and stopped a gentleman on the highway.'

Gibbon agreed with Boswell that performances of *The Beggar's Opera* might well tend to increase the numbers of highwaymen; but they might also, even so, have a beneficial effect, he thought, 'in refining that class of men, making them less ferocious, more polite, in short, more like gentlemen'. John Fielding, however, made no such allowances. In his decided view the work did have a dangerous tendency to corrupt, and would have no effect on the subsequent manners of those corrupted.

On its first presentation in 1728, Defoe had expressed the view that it was open to objection for 'making a highwayman the hero and dismissing him at last unpunished.' And this was what Fielding found particularly invidious. So certain was he that the piece was never 'represented on the stage without creating an additional number of real thieves', that he went out of his way to persuade David Garrick to change the ending, and once asked him to cancel a revival altogether.

In France, where highwaymen did not constitute a professional élite as they did in England, and where there was fear that the play might lead to the creation of a different type of gentleman highwayman, the final scene *was* changed to show Macheath being hanged. But in England, where the death of a highwayman on the gallows was so often seen as a kind of martyrdom, the last scene, when it was changed after 1776 at John Fielding's determined instigation, showed Macheath being transported to some unromantic colony.

Even so the arguments about the propriety of the criminal being represented as a hero at all were long continued. Debated with increased force each time a similar work of lesser merit appeared, they reached a new pitch of intensity when Harrison Ainsworth published *Rookwood* and made a hero of the vicious Dick Turpin.

Ainsworth, as a boy, had been fascinated by highwaymen. 'I had always a strange passion for highwaymen,' he wrote in

the preface to *Rookwood*, 'and have listened by the hour to their exploits, as narrated to me by my father, and especially to those of "Dauntless Dick", that "chief minion of the moon" . . . Turpin was the hero of my boyhood.'

Since Turpin's death in 1739, the legends that surrounded his name had proliferated year by year as the Sheppard legends had done. Chap-books, ballads, prints and local histories had spread romantic stories about him, most of which bore scant relation to the truth. Few counties from Yorkshire to Surrey did not have at least a few inns where he had spent the night; there were 'Turpin Oaks' and 'Turpin Caves' everywhere; authentic Turpin pistols, Turpin spurs and Turpin masks were as common as the bones of saints in medieval Germany. His ride to York on brave Black Bess was acknowledged a triumph of grit and endurance.

He never had ridden to York. In Defoe's *Tour through Great Britain* there is the story of a highwayman known as 'Swift Nicks', who robbed a traveller at Gad's Hill near Chatham in Kent at four o'clock in the morning. In order to establish an alibi, Defoe says, 'Swift Nicks' rode north to York where he appeared on the bowling green at a quarter to eight that evening. He had wasted an hour at Gravesend, and so covered the two hundred and twenty miles in less than fifteen hours.

Another highwayman given the credit for a ride to York is one Harris, 'the famous highwayman who robbed on the Black Mare'. According to the author of the *Narrative of the Life and surprising Robberies and Adventures of William Page* (1758), Harris 'committed a robbery in the morning in Surrey, on a gentleman who knew him perfectly well, and therefore Harris rode for it, with such speed, trusting to the goodness of his mare, that in the evening, about sunset, he appeared on the Bowling Green at York; and pulling out his watch, showed it to the gentlemen present. But, notwithstanding this prodigious performance, namely, the riding one hundred and ninety-four miles in one day, so positive was the evidence against him, that he was convicted upon it. The Old Duke

of Richmond, as I remember, was so charmed with the vastness of the performance, and the bravery of the man, that he interceded for his life, and obtained it. . . .'

Clearly a ride to York was a feat much admired in highwaymen and it was not long before Dick Turpin was credited with the exploit, which was to make him the inspiration of the young Ainsworth.

When Ainsworth came to record the astonishing ride as a conclusion to *Rookwood*, he felt himself 'animated by kindred enthusiasm.'

'The Ride to York,' he proudly recalled, 'was completed in one day and one night. This feat – for a feat it was, being the composition of a hundred ordinary novel pages in less than twenty-four hours – was achieved at 'The Elms' – a home I then occupied at Kilburn . . . From the moment I got Turpin on the high road till I landed him at York, I wrote on and on without the slightest sense of effort . . . Well do I remember the fever into which I was thrown during the time of composition. My pen literally galloped over the pages. So thoroughly did I identify myself with the highwayman, that, once started, I found it impossible to halt . . . In his company I mounted the hillside, dashed through the bustling village, swept over the desolate heath, threaded the silent street, plunged into the eddying stream, and kept an onward course, without pause, without hinderance, without fatigue. With him I shouted, sang, laughed, exulted, wept.' . . .

At the beginning of this century, Harrison Ainsworth's biographer, S. M. Ellis, followed the route of Turpin's ride, from Tottenham to Ware, from Huntingdon to Stamford, from Newark to York, and found that there was not a village on the Great North Road that did not have some relic of the highwayman whose legends had long since been accepted as truth.

Here you could learn how Turpin refreshed Black Bess with strong ale and see the very tankard he used; there you would be shown the marks of the mare's hoofs on the top of a five-barred toll-gate.

Even those who knew that the ride was a fiction preferred to believe that it was true. Thomas Seccombe, who wrote a highly flattering account of Turpin's career in *The Essex Review* in 1902, cried 'Let the legend grow! It is one of the big verities of fiction, of Fiction which is far greater and stronger than Truth! On clear nights, when the road winds upward through dark copse and hollow to the dry and bracing upland, and spectral gates and railings reflect white light from the moon, my belief in Dick Turpin far outweighs my incredulity. I see the gallant outlaw dashing across the open, I hear the regular tlot-a-tlap of his horse's hoofs, I see the smoking breath of Black Bess, and watch the curve of her flanks as she stretches herself on the level turf . . .'

Thousands of other admirers, excited by the legends and by Ainsworth's portrait, felt the same. Although Turpin is, in fact, only a secondary character in *Rookwood*, it was he who was greeted as the book's hero. In France, indeed, its title became *Les Gentilshommes de Grand Chemin*.

The success of the book was immediate and enduring. Published in three volumes in 1834, the first edition was soon sold out; three more editions closely followed them, and Ainsworth's reputation was made. His handsome features could be seen on hundreds of advertisements in the new horse-drawn omnibuses which had just made their first appearance in London, and in Maclise's famous Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters; engravings of his hero were published by Colnaghi and 'every inn on the Great North Road proudly displayed them'; dramatized versions of the novel were produced at the Adelphi, the Victoria Theatre and elsewhere; a circus drama, with pistol shots, cracking whips and prancing horses, was presented at Astley's and was intermittently revived throughout the nineteenth century.

The critics, also, welcomed the appearance of this 'English Victor Hugo', whose marvellous story, *The Spectator* said, was 'written with great vigour and wonderful variety'. But there were some who saw in the idealization of a criminal and his crimes the same sort of dangers which Sir John Fielding

had seen in *The Beggar's Opera*. This criticism became more pronounced when, in 1840, *Rookwood* was followed by *Jack Sheppard*, a work which transformed a little highwayman into what the author himself described as 'the lion of the day'.

*Jack Sheppard* proved an even greater success than *Rookwood*, and its enormous sales eclipsed those of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, a work of incomparably wider scope and purpose. Dickens's friend, the influential critic, John Forster, joined in the attack, on the 'bad morals' of *Jack Sheppard*. 'Public morality and public decency,' he wrote, 'have rarely been more endangered than by the trumpeted exploits of *Jack Sheppard*.'

Thackeray also disliked the work and condemned the reversal of moral values which it tended to condone. 'Ainsworth dared not paint his hero as the scoundrel he knew him to be,' Thackeray wrote in *The Times* on 2 September 1840. 'He must keep his brutalities in the background . . . and so he produces a book quite absurd and unreal, and infinitely more immoral than anything Fielding ever wrote.'

Thackeray's *Catherine* was a very funny burlesque of such criminal romances as *Jack Sheppard*; while a *Literary Recipe* which appeared in *Punch* ridiculed their contents. Other parodies by Professor Aytoun and Sir Theodore Martin, author of *Flowers of Hemp: or the Newgate Garland*, appeared in the *Bon Gaultier Ballads*.

One of their joint compositions pretends to imitate the style of Wordsworth's lines to Milton:

> 'Turpin, thou should'st be living at this hour:
> England hath need of thee . . .
>
> Great men have been among us – names that lend
> A lustre to our calling – better none:
> Maclaine, Duval, Dick Turpin, Barrington,
> Blueskin and others, who called Sheppard friend.'

Private readers were also aware of the objections which could be raised to these criminal romances. Miss Mitford,

for example, told a friend that she had been reading *Jack Sheppard* and had 'been struck by the great danger, in these times, of representing authorities so constantly and fearfully in the wrong . . . Of course, Mr Ainsworth had no such design, but such is the effect, and as the millions who see it represented at the minor theatres will not distinguish between now and a hundred years back, all the Chartists in the land are less dangerous than this nightmare of a book, and I, Radical as I am, lament any additional temptations to outbreak, with all its train of horrors . . . My friend Mr Hughes speaks well of Mr Ainsworth. His father was a collector of these old robber stories, and used to repeat the local ballads upon Turpin, etc., to his son, as he sat upon his knee; and this has perhaps been at the bottom of the matter.'

Ainsworth's supporters insisted that a 'great deal of rubbish has been scribbled by superficial critics concerning the so-called "immoral influences" ' of these romances that turned highwaymen into heroes. They demanded to know just how many idle young gentlemen had been encouraged to take to the road by *The Beggar's Opera*; how many apprentices had been corrupted by *Rookwood*; how many errand-boys by *Jack Sheppard*. They argued that if Ainsworth were to be condemned for making Turpin and Sheppard sympathetic and admirable, should not Shakespeare be blamed for Falstaff, and, to name a more recent example, Hood for Eugene Aram?

But whether or not those who questioned the morality of the 'Newgate romances' or who expressed fear of their corrupting influence were indeed humbugs and alarmists, there could be no doubt that the numerous sensational plays based on the Jack Sheppard story which filled the cheap London theatres in the 1840's *did* have an effect on imitative crime.

Those who had denied the likelihood of this were forced to modify their views when the valet Courvoisier was tried for the murder of his seventy-two-year-old employer, Lord William Russell, at his house in Park Lane. Courvoisier said that he had first been inspired to cut the cantankerous old

man's throat by the adventures of Jack Sheppard which he had seen enacted at a theatre a few nights before.

As a result of this confession, the Lord Chamberlain refused any more licences for the performance of plays with the name 'Jack Sheppard' in their title. There were scores of other plays, though, that might have a similar effect on a disordered mind. And who was to say that censorship of plays or books that seemed to corrupt the impressionable mind might not lead to censorship for far less worthy reasons and to the suppression of works of real artistic worth? It is a question which is still in debate.

In the days of the highwayman, however, the issue was more clear. When the human taste for sadism and violence could be indulged less vicariously, the danger of corruption lay not so much in the presentation of atrocities, perversions and torture for public entertainment, but – as the Fieldings constantly warned – in the tendencies of such productions as *The Beggar's Opera* and Alexander Smith's *History of the Most Notorious Highwaymen* to make heroes out of villains.

The highwayman in a sense was, of course, bound to be a hero, for he was a rebel, a free man in a society in which those who were not free were exploited and oppressed. A sort of emblematic figure of liberty and pleasure, he was in revolt against the law and against morality. And the imagination of the public has always been more readily caught by the outsider than by the upholder of authority, by the gay and daring sinner than by the humdrum saint, even though the saint may be the real upholder of liberty which the criminal does not want for others but only for himself.

The idea of the highwayman as a personification of liberty and pleasure, rather than as a selfish criminal, long outlived his period, however, and still survives today.

'It was necessary to the success and even to the safety of the highwayman that he should be a bold and skilful rider,' Lord Macaulay explained, 'and that his manners and appearance should be such as suited the master of a fine horse. He therefore held an aristocratical position in the community of

thieves, appeared at fashionable coffee houses and gaming houses, and betted with men of quality on the race ground. Sometimes, indeed, he was a man of good family and education. A romantic interest therefore attached, and perhaps still attaches, to the names of freebooters of this class. The vulgar eagerly drank in tales of their ferocity and audacity, of the occasional acts of generosity and good nature, of their amours, of the miraculous escapes, and of their manly bearing at the bar and in the cart.'

Nor was it only the 'vulgar' who eagerly drank in tales of this sort. The Abbé le Blanc, during his travels in England in 1737 was continually meeting Englishmen 'who were not less vain in boasting of the success of their highwaymen than of the bravery of their troops. Tales of their cunning and generosity were in the mouths of everybody, and a noted thief was a kind of hero.'

He remained a kind of hero to Englishmen long after the Abbé's death. The highwayman 'followed a liberal profession,' Thomas de Quincey thought, 'one which required more accomplishments than either the bar or the pulpit, since it presumed a bountiful endowment of qualifications – strength, health, agility, and excellent horsemanship, intrepidity of the first order, presence of mind, courtesy, and a general ambidexterity of powers for facing all accidents and for turning to good account all unlooked-for contingencies.

'The finest men in England, physically speaking, throughout the last century, the very noblest specimens of man, considered as an animal, were the mounted robbers who cultivated their profession on the great roads. When every traveller carried firearms the mounted robber lived in an element of danger and adventurous gallantry.'

In vain had the Fieldings protested against this type of wildly delusive portrait; in vain do authorities now protest that the effect of much objective anti-crime propaganda 'is dissipated by the glamour with which crime and criminals are exploited for the amusement of the public'; in vain do moralists lament the idealization of professional criminals,

such as those latter-day highwaymen, the great train robbers.

The legend of the criminal as hero is old and strong. Perhaps it is indestructible. Certainly the myth of the highwayman as gallant 'hero of the turf' will die very hard.

'The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
Riding – riding –
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door. . . . '

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# Index


Ainsworth, Harrison (1805–82), and *Rookwood*, 49, 113, 114, 115, 116, 118; *Jack Sheppard*, 99, 117–18; and Dick Turpin, 114, 115, 116; Miss Mitford on, 118
Archenholz, Johann Wilhelm von, on courtesy of highwaymen, 15; and his money, 34
Aytoun, William Edmonstoune (1813–1865), 117

*Beggar's Opera, The*, 102; opinions on morality of, 103–13, 119
Black Bess, 114, 115, 116
Blanc, Abbé le, on highwaymen, 14, 97, 120
Borrow, George Henry (1803–81), 63
Boswell, James (1740–95), 113; on *The Beggar's Opera*, 103–4
Bow Street, Henry Fielding comes to, 75; 'Mr Fielding's People' stay on at, 76
Bow Street Magistrates, Rann before, 32
Bow Street Runners, 76
Bribery, 57, 86
Brothels, 73
Butler, Samuel (1612–80), his Ode to Duval, 40

*Catherine*, 117
Censorship, 119
Charles I (1600–49), 25
Cibber, Colley (1671–1757), 102
Clerkenwell Prison, *see* New Prison, Clerkenwell
Clothes, of M'Lean, 27; of Rann, 31, 32; stolen, 36
Coke, Sir Edward (1552–1634), on Robin Hood, 25
Congreve, William (1670–1729), 102
Courvoisier (murderer of Lord William Russell), 118–19
Criminals (*see also* Highwaymen), Blake, Joseph, 100–2; Blueskin, *see* Blake, Joseph; Cook, James, 88; Hitchen, Charles, 73; Milliner, Mary, 73; Sheppard, Jack, *see separate entry*; Wild, Jonathan, *see separate entry*

Defoe, Daniel (1660–1731), Jack Sheppard and, 98; and *The Beggar's Opera*, 113; *Tour through Great Britain*, 114
Dekker, Thomas (*c.* 1570–*c.* 1641), 56
Dickens, Charles (1812–70), 117
Disguise, 55, 56, 58
Drury Lane, 50
Duval, Claude, 93, 95; his history, 38–40; opinions of, 40–9

Ellis, S. M., 115
Epping Forest, Turpin and King in, 51
Essex Gang, the, 52; Turpin becomes leader of, 49; exploits of, 49–51
Executions, 90–6; of Turpin, 53;

public, 86; of Sheppard, 99; of Macheath, 113

Fairfax, Thomas, 3rd Baron Fairfax (1612–71), Parsons and, 28; Moll Cutpurse and, 56
Fielding, Henry (1707–54), and ill effects of gambling, 28; early history of, 75; his efforts for reform, 75–7; outlines his plan for Bow Street office, 78; condemns glamorization of highwaymen, 94, 119, 120
Fielding, Sir John (d. 1780), 75, 120; quoted, 63; joins his brother at Bow Street, 77; his efforts, 79–81; submits new plan to Government, 81–82; success of his plan, 82–3; and *The Beggar's Opera*, 113, 116–17, 119
Footmen, Walpole's, 6; duties of, 31; Duval as, 38
Footpads, 37; in London, 16
Forster, John (1812–76), attacks *Jack Sheppard*, 117

Garrick, David (1717–79), Sir John Fielding and, 113
Gay, John (1685–1732), *Newgate's Garland*, 100–1; *The Beggar's Opera*, 102
George I (1660–1727), and Jack Sheppard, 98, 99
George II (1683–1760), robbed, 16
Gibbon, Edward (1737–94), on *The Beggar's Opera*, 113

Hampstead, 98
Harper, Charles G., on Duval, 40–9
Highgate, 83
Highwaymen: Adams, Dick, 30; Ashton, John, 91–2; Austin, Tom, 92; Baynes, Andrew, 36; Bird, Edward, 92–3; Bonnet, Ned, 30; Bowden (Turpin's accomplice), 52; Cady, William, 38; Collet, Jack, 55; Congden, Bob, 37; Cottington, John, 26; Cutpurse, Moll, *see* Frith, Mary; Davis, William, 55; Douglas, Sawney, 93; Duval, Claude, *see separate entry*; Evans, Captain Evan, 37; Fleming, Charles, 79; Fleming, Patrick, 36; 'the Flying Highwayman', 54; Frith, Mary, 56; Halsey, Jacob, 35–6; Harris, rides to York, 114; Hind, Captain, 26; Horner, Nicholas, 28; Howard, Zachary, 25; Hughes, Dick, 93; Jackson, Francis, *see separate entry*; King, Tom, 51, 52; Lewin, William, 87; Lewis, Paul, 28, 90–1; Miles, Edward, 87; M'Lean, James, *see separate entry*; Neal, Dennis, 78; O'Bryan, Patrick, 36–7; Page, William, 55; Parsons, William, 28; Picken, Joseph, 30; Plunkett (M'Lean's accomplice), 27; Ratsey, Gamaliel, 55; Reynolds, Captain, 25; Rowland, Tom, 55, 93; Roy, Gilder, 37–8; Stafford, Captain Philip, 25; 'Swift Nicks', 114; Sympson, Thomas, 55–6; Turpin, Dick, *see separate entry*; White, Huffey, 93; Wilmot, Thomas, 38; Withers, John, 38
Highwaymen, 'as common as crows', 14; intimidate Londoners, 14; their courtesy, 15, 16–25; Cavaliers as, 25–6; Macaulay on, 29; usual background of, 29–30, 31; Saussure on, 34; when defied, 34–5; invective of, 35; prodigality of, 57; methods of, 57–9; how to recognize, 61–2; their behaviour at time of execution, 90; superstitions about corpses of, 96; as hero, 119–21
Hill, Aaron (1685–1750), 102
Hogarth, William (1697–1764), 95, 98
Holland, Henry Fox, 1st Baron (1705–1774), 95
Hood, Robin, 25
Horse Patrol, Fielding suggests formation of, 82; disbanded and reassembled, 83; restoration of, 84
Hounslow Heath, 28, 32, 56, 79
Hunt, James Henry Leigh (1784–1859), on Duval, 40

Informers, Common, 64–73, 78
*Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*, 76, 90
Islington, the Angel, 83–4

Jackson, Francis, on habits of highwaymen, 54, 57–9; on the power of money, 57; advice to travellers, 59–61; advice to innkeepers, 61–2
Johnson, Dr Samuel (1709–84), on *The Beggar's Opera*, 103
Justices of the Peace, 60

Kensington, 83

Lévis, Duc de, on highwaymen's behaviour, 15, 29; on Continental highwaymen, 16

Macaulay, Thomas Babington, 1st Baron (1800–59), on highwaymen, 29, 119–20
Macheath, Captain, 102, 113
Maclise, Daniel (1806–70), 116
Magistrates, 75
Martin, Sir Theodore (1816–1909), 117
Mayor of London, Lord, Jonathan Wild and, 73; robbed, 83
Marylebone, 50
Middleton, Thomas (*c.* 1570–1627), 56
Mitford, Mary Russell (1787–1855), on immorality of *Jack Sheppard*, 117–18
M'Lean, James, 93; his history, 26–8; execution of, 95; in Newgate, 97
Mountford, Lord, 97

*Newgate Calendar, The*, on Rann, 31–32; report on Duval in, 49
Newspapers and periodicals: *Annual Register*, 54; *Birmingham Gazette*, 15–16; *Country Journal*, 52; *Daily Journal*, 95, 98, 102; *Essex Review*, 116; *General Advertiser*, 77; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 14; *Grub Street Journal*, 52; *London Evening Post*, 49–50; *Morning Chronicle*, 81; *Parker's London News*, 96, 98; *Public Advertiser*, 79, 81; *Punch*, 117; *Salisbury Journal*, 85, 87; *Spectator*, 116; *Weekly Register*, 31
Newcastle, Thomas Pelham Holles, 1st Duke of (1693–1768), and the Fielding brothers, 77
Newgate, 99; sightseeing at, 97, 98; Sheppard escapes from, 98
New Prison Clerkenwell, 98
North, Frederick, 8th Lord (1732–79), robbed, 13, 83
Northumberland, Duchess of, and William Parsons, 28

Old Bailey, 104; M'Lean at, 27; Blueskin and Wild at, 100
*Oliver Twist*, 117

Peachum, Polly, 103
Petersham, Lady Caroline, 27–8, 97
Phillips, Robert, on 18th-century road conditions, 14
Piccadilly, 77
Police (*see also* Horse Patrol), and highwaymen, 62; Englishman's reluctance to accept, 63; constables, 76
Pope, Alexander (1688–1744), 102
Pope, Dr William, on Duval, 38–9
Pringle, Patrick (b. 1917), 80
Pritchett, V. S. (b. 1900), 97
Proctor, Mother, 95
Punishment, hanging in chains, 85, 88, 89; hanging, 85–6, 89; imprisonment, 86; transportation, 86; gibbeting of corpses, 86–7; moral effect of public executions, 95

Quakers, 29, 35; Captain Smith makes mock of, 35-6
Quincey, Thomas de (1785–1859), eulogizes highwaymen, 120
Queensberry, Charles Douglas, 3rd Duke of (1698–1778), 102

Radzinowicz, Dr Leon (b. 1907), 80

Rann, John, 93; his history, 31–3
Rape, 35, 36–7, 50
Rewards, for conviction of highwaymen, 64–73; for thief-taking, 73, 74; sums paid as, 75; and 'Mr Fielding's People', 76
Riot Act, 99
Roads, conditions in 18th century, 13–14
*Roaring Girle, The*, 56
Roche, Sophie von la, 14
*Romany Rye*, 63
*Rookwood*, *see* Ainsworth, Harrison
Russell, Lord William, murdered, 118

St Constant, Ferri de, on highwaymen, 25
Saint Fond, Faujas de, on Sunday travel, 60n.
St Giles's Roundhouse, 98
St James's, 27
Saussure, César de, on highwaymen, 15, 34; on English law, 64
Seccombe, Thomas, on the Turpin legend, 116
Selwyn, George (1719–91), 95
Sheppard, Jack (1702–24), 118, 119; his history, 97–100
'Sixteen-String Jack', *see* Rann, John
Smith, Captain Alexander, his *History . . . of Highwaymen*, 29, 30, 119; and Jacob Halsey, 36
Swift, Jonathan (1667–1745), *Clever Tom Clinch*, 94; and John Gay, 101, 102

Thackeray, William Makepeace (1811–63), attacks *Jack Sheppard*, 117
Theatre, the, and imitative crime, 118
Theatres: Adelphi, 116; Astley's, 116; Drury Lane, 99, 102; Lincoln's Inn Fields, 102; Little Theatre, Haymarket, 75; Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, 102; Sadler's Wells, 81; Victoria, 116
Thief-takers, 73, 74
Thornhill, Sir James (1675–1734), 98
Travel, dangers of, 14; advice to travellers, 59–61
Turpin, Dick (1705–39), 38, 90, 93; his history, 49–53; his corpse, 96; hero of *Rookwood*, 113; Ainsworth on, 114; his legend perpetuated, 114, 115, 116
Tyburn, 28, 75; Fielding on executions at, 90; Hughes at, 93; Tyburn Fair, 95; Sheppard hanged at, 99

Veil, Sir Thomas de (d. 1746), 75

Wales, Prince of (later George IV 1762–1830), robbed, 83
Walker, Thomas, 103
Walpole, Horace, 4th Earl of Orford (1717–97), robbed, 13; and M'Lean, 26; on a robbery in Piccadilly, 77; on visiting Newgate, 97
Walpole, Sir Robert, 1st Earl of Orford (1676–1745), 103
Wandsworth, 52
Watchmen, 78; Jackson on, 60; Fielding on, 76
Welch, Saunders, 76
White's, 27, 97
Wild, Jonathan (*c.* 1682–1725), history of, 73–4; and Blueskin, 100, 101
William IV (1765–1837) on George II and highwayman, 16
Wimbledon Common, 16
Winchester, Statue of (1285), 64

York, Turpin imprisoned at, 53; rides to, 114–16

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